THE FUTURE OF PC GAMING

BIOSHOCK CREATOR KEN LEVINE ON THE EVOLUTION OF THE PLATFORM PAGE 55

GAMES OF THE YEAR

THE BEST PC GAMES OF 2007

Games for Windows™

ISSUE 16 \ MARCH 2008 \ THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

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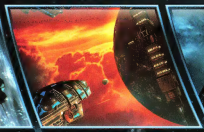

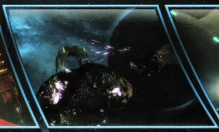

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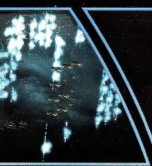

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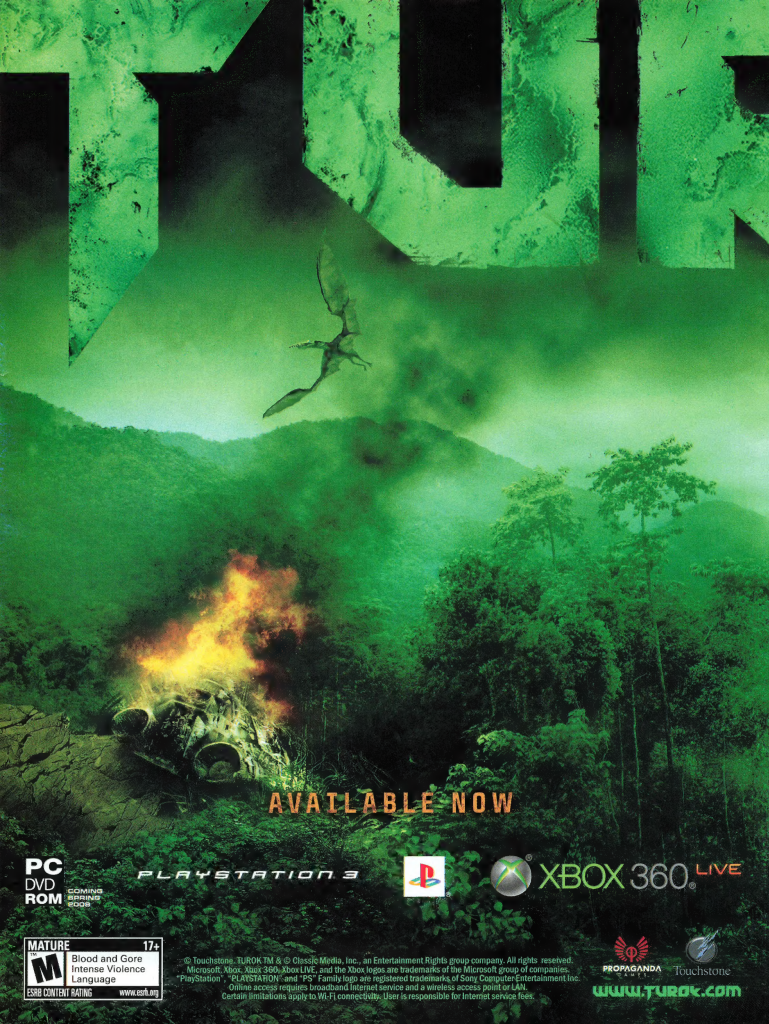

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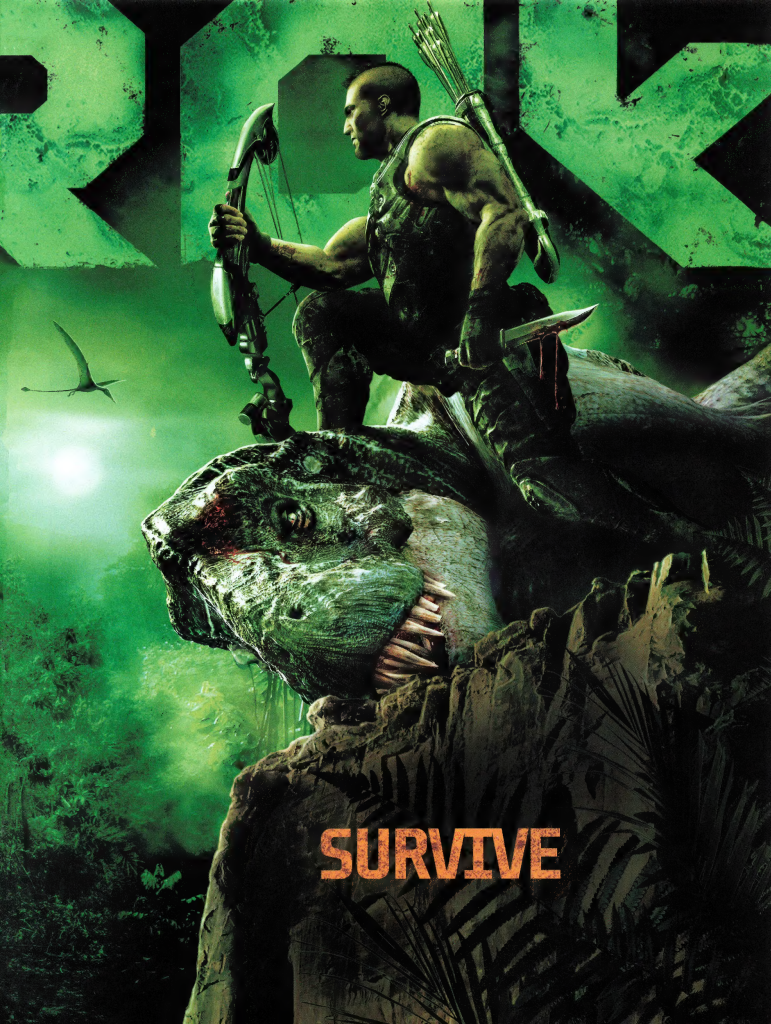
SURVIVE

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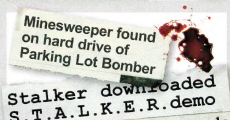

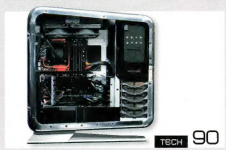

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XTRAS

THIS MONTH ON GFW.1UP.COM

After reading our 1UP Network Editors' Choice Award winners for PC gaming, go to 1UPawards.1UP.com for readers' picks and console winners from our sister publication *EGM*.

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EA'S BIG GAMBLE

Battlefield Heroes points the way toward the PC's future

"You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows," Bob Dylan famously sang in 1965's "Subterranean Homesick Blues." And right now in PC gaming land, the wind is blowing strong enough in a certain direction that plenty of publishers and developers are taking notice and acting accordingly. Exhibit A: Electronic Arts and DICE, makers of the blockbuster *Battlefield* franchise, who, as you can read about in this month's cover story, are following the wind and going in a totally different direction with *Battlefield Heroes*. Gone is the $60 box, the high-end requirements, the noobs-need-not-apply hardcore gameplay. In its place? A free (yes, free) game with hardware requirements that pretty much everyone can already meet, and with gameplay accessible to all.

Yeah, I can feel you cringing from here, *Battlefield* fans. And, hey, it's fair and reasonable to be skeptical. But read the article. EA may be reacting to recent market forces, which strongly suggest that hardcore, PC-only titles are likely to meet with limited success and therefore are increasingly harder to justify rating a multimillion-dollar development budget. But, on the other hand, what is not being lost here is the desire to still make a good game, an addictive game, a game that will not only attract you because it's free but will also hold your attention and keep you coming back for more. And when you are hooked? Well, maybe then they can encourage you to spend a few bucks here and there. Or maybe not.

Obviously, EA did not make up this strategy. It is the wind that they are following, a trail blazed partially by hugely popular free online games for the younger crowd, like *Habbo Hotel* and *MapleStory* (a phenomenon that we, not coincidentally, also cover this issue on pg. 24), and also by such free content providers and social networking tools as Facebook and YouTube.

BioShock creator Ken Levine, interviewed this month as part of our Games of the Year feature, postulates that we may be coming to the end of PC-only blockbuster titles. Certainly great success can be had by smaller niche titles like *Armageddon Empires*, reviewed this month. And of course behemoths like *World of WarCraft* and *The Sims* continue to prove the exception to every rule. But the times definitely are a-changin', as Mr. Dylan also sang, and *Battlefield Heroes* may prove to just be an opening salvo here in 2008. It's going to be fun to watch.

In sadder news, with this issue we say goodbye to longtime Tech Editor, Freeloader, and all-around good guy Darren Gladstone, who's abandoning us after five years to pursue an even dorkier job at some other magazine. Good luck, man, and thanks for all the free keyboards!

Jeff Green
Editor-in-Chief, *Games for Windows: The Official Magazine*

Now Playing: *Puzzle Quest, World of WarCraft, Peggle*
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MEET THE STAFF

SEAN MOLLOY
MANAGING EDITOR
Why are there two Zunigams all of a sudden?

Now Playing: *World of WarCraft, the Half-Life saga (again)*
1UP.com Blog: GFWSean.1UP.com

DARREN GLADSTONE
SENIOR EDITOR (FEATURES/TECH)
Before wrapping his last issue as a *GFW* editor, Darren set the time delay on his Lego robot, Killtron 5000. It activates in 5...4...3... so long, suckers!

Now Playing: Excel, PCMark 3006, Blackjack at O'Shea's
1UP.com Blog: GFWDarren.1UP.com

RYAN SCOTT
EDITOR (REVIEWS/EXTEND)
Ryan's brain no work right now.

Now Playing: *Team Fortress 2, Puzzle Quest*
1UP.com Blog: GFWRyan.1UP.com

SHAWN ELLIOTT
EDITOR (START)
Shawn thinks *Battlefield Heroes* sounds better than *Battlefield 2142*.

Now Playing: *Company of Heroes, Team Fortress 2*
1UP.com Blog: GFWShawn.1UP.com

MICHAEL JENNINGS
ART DIRECTOR
Michael is so thrilled this deadline is over that he almost doesn't care MC Hammer's "Can't Touch This" has been playing in his head nonstop for the past two days...almost.

Now Playing: *Call of Duty 4*
1UP.com Blog: GFWMichael.1UP.com

ROSEMARY PINKHAM
JUNIOR DESIGNER
Rosie doesn't have a bucktooth in real life. Only in this picture.

Now Playing: *Take a guess...*
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MARCH 2008

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Letters

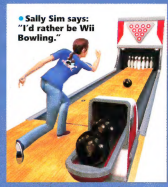
We'd rather be Wii Bowling

LETTER OF THE MONTH

A CHANGING FACE

To me, *The Sims* dwarfing good hardcore PC games on the sales charts for the past couple of years seems like a sign. With the recent success of the Nintendo Wii, developers are starting to take the easy route to game design by producing cheap and often crappy titles, usually tied to a big-name license to further drive sales. It's easy to take a step back and say movies, music, and television have had these kinds of problems for decades—but paying $8 to see a movie on a Friday night is different from spending $600 for a gaming console or $2,300 getting high-end PC parts to fix up your own tower and *then* spending $50 to $60 on a game. Games are also getting an amazing stream of income from in-game advertising nowadays, yet the prices of these titles aren't dropping at all. Is the consumer really winning, at this point? I think most hardcore gamers can agree that we don't want to be spending all this money to invest in a hobby, when all we're going to get out of it is an interactive infomercial based on a kind-of good movie. Are you afraid for the future of videogames?

Jerry Friestad



Sally Sim says: "I'd rather be Wii Bowling."

PC gaming is changing, as many of the articles in this very issue suggest, but to use *The Sims* as an example of designers taking "the easy route" and making "cheap and often crappy titles" is to unfairly dismiss, in our humble opinions of course, a great franchise, unfairly maligned by gamers because of its popularity. In reality, *The Sims* was a big gamble for EA at the time, and its incredible success to this day in fact points to the continued viability of the platform.

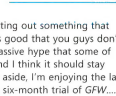
GEARHEADS

I know you guys love to hate on each and every title that utilizes Games for Windows Live capabilities, and you probably don't much like the higher numbers of console-to-PC ports these days, but sometimes, I think you let these things get the best of you.

Case in point: In your January 2008 issue, editor-in-chief Jeff Green states in his *Gears of War* review that his "home clunker" PC, outfitted with 2GB of RAM and a GeForce 8800, "barely ran it." I find this odd, because my machine, which sports almost identical stats (2GB RAM, GeForce 8800GTS, Intel Core 2 2.4GHz CPU) runs the game almost exclusively at 60-plus frames per second, all at 1680x1050 resolution with the highest possible detail settings. Don't you people even bother to play these games on more than one machine?

Don't get me wrong, though—I'm not some idiotic Xbox 360 fanboy trying to push for a perfect review of *Gears*.... I'm just pointing out something that seems odd to me. It's good that you guys don't get stoned on the massive hype that some of these games push, and I think it should stay that way. Complaints aside, I'm enjoying the last few issues of my free six-month trial of *GFW*.... Keep up the (mostly) good work!

Martin Crownover



Brumak says: "I'd rather be Wii Bowling."

Given the wide variety of PC hardware out there, and the manufacturers who provide that hardware, it's more than possible to see dramatically different results on two very similar machines. Trust us, we played *Gears* on multiple machines—and what we said, at least in our experience, rings true.

I SPY

Lately, I've noticed that some games (such as *Unreal Tournament 3* and *Clive Barker's Jericho*) require you to install the software version of Ageia's physics engine onto your system. It bothers me, because it's wholly separate from the game and integrates itself into Windows as a service, and you also have to uninstall it separately from whatever game is using it. Why can't this software be just part of the gaming code itself, like the Havok system (from Source games) or earlier physics engines? Ageia has already been all but laughed out of existence for its silly hardware "physics accelerator," so is the engine worth the extra intrusiveness into my system?

Bowling-ball-shaped thing from *Jericho* says: "I'd rather be Wii Bowling."

This brings up a larger point: Lots of online games require other add-ons to facilitate matchmaking. Personally, I despise GameSpy and its ilk, and I wonder why more games can't have their own integrated software that doesn't need to be installed separately on your system. Is the industry just specializing? Are developers just outsourcing more and more of everything? Am I the only person who gets annoyed by the intrusive third-party apps? What do you guys think of all this?

SB

We don't mind the simple stuff like Valve or GameSpy's matchmaking software (as far as game publishers are concerned, these types of platforms are easy and widespread ways of connecting their player base). It's when >

MAIL BYTES

What is the meaning of putting two, TWO pages of letters to the editor? That extra page could have been put to good use by advertising a new game most people will never play, or an additional editorial rant from the editor!

A.B. Normal

An industry that is moving towards MMORPGs and a magazine that follows them is going to leave me behind, at least until I wake up and decide *Kingdom of Loathing* no longer satisfies my MMORPG needs.

Jamie Adams

I've been reading the magazine for about five years and listening to the podcast since it started, and they're both great. Keep up the good work, and don't listen to those whiners who bitch about how ungreat the magazine is.

Brian M.

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FEBRUARY 2008

PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE

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PC GAME OF THE MONTH

TEEN
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Alcohol and Tobacco Reference
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Mild Language
Sexual Themes
Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org
Online Interactions Not Rated By ESRB

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we get into the truly invasive stuff—like, say, StarForce or SecuROM—that we start to worry. All told, we certainly agree with your general point that games shouldn't install a bunch of extra junk onto your PC.

PICKING THE WRONG FIGHT

Generally there is some great stuff in *GFW*, especially the Freeloader stuff, but including a nod to *Bible Fight*, a game that mocks Christianity, just isn't cool, especially to Christian readers of your magazine such as myself. Please be respectful, not discriminating, towards your Christian readers who enjoy your publication.

Also, great observations about the awful *Daikatana* mess. After wasting time struggling with the limited graphic-card support, what a huge disappointment that game turned out to be. That ad campaign, as you pointed out, was as equally flawed as the game was.

Rob Marsh

GET A MAP

● **Special-forces assassin Aeran Pierce says: "I'd rather be Wii Bowling."**

Fifty percent of Shawn Elliott's review of *BlackSite: Area 51* (*GFW* #15, pg. 74) has absolutely nothing to do with the game. Why are you talking about WWII when the game is set in modern times? Why are you talking about Iraq when the game takes place in Nevada? I understand that the game has some political message set in tone to Iraq, but if you want to say something—just flat out say it and not write a paragraph and a half about nothing.

Beau Kebodeaux

For the record, the game actually *starts* in Iraq. It's, like, the first level. Which, by our crazy logic, makes Iraq at least partially relevant to the game, bumping the review's relevance index to at least 75 percent.

UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

Since you fools edited out 90 percent of my brilliant letter last month and then changed everything I said so it sounded stupid, I will write one hate letter per month to your magazine for the rest of its existence. And I will make my letters so short that you won't possibly be able to edit them, no matter how hard you try. On an unrelated note, I loved Bruce Geryk's column on *Armageddon Empires*.

Jack Gray

We're betting the minor edits we made to this letter are driving you nuts, Jack. In any case, sometimes we have to paraphrase letters to make 'em fit (yours was a long one), but we agree that your last one was mucked with just a little too extensively. We'll do better from now on.

THE NONEVOLUTION OF LARA CROFT

● **Lara Croft says: "I'd rather be Wii Bowling."**

While harping on about greater realism in the upcoming *Tomb Raider: Underworld* (*GFW* #15, pg. 39), did creative director Eric Lindstrom ever consider changing Lara's clothing? I imagine that short shorts and an infinitely tight tank top might be unsuitable for braving the elements and traversing dangerous environments.

Lara's scantily clad dress is only one aspect of a consistent tradition of sexism in the *Tomb Raider* series. Lara's unrealistic proportions and a camera dedicated to displaying her womanly features at *any* gameplay cost reek of a developer pandering to the lowest common denominator. Not to mention the infamous 1990s ad campaign that glorified Lara as a sexual object and alienated sensible male gamers, female gamers, and casual observers alike.

So here we are, eight *Tomb Raider* installments and 12 years since the series debuted, and sexism in this series and in other parts of the industry get a free pass in the gaming press. It is long past due for video game consumers and especially journalists to confront this serious issue.

Mohammad A.

We agree 100 percent that sexism is still rampant in some games, but in Lara's defense, at least she's better educated, stronger, more successful, and sittier than the male characters she meets—more than you can say for plenty of other female game characters.

10 OUT OF 10!

To the guys who write the game reviews: Thanks for giving me the heads-up on what's out there, what's coming up next, and what to avoid. After all, my time is precious, and I don't want to waste it trying out something lame. Instead, I can focus on checking out the types of games I like, that you have reviewed positively. Once in awhile you are way off, but more often than not, you give me really useful information that saves me tons of time.

I read everything in the mag (even the technical stuff). It gives me lots of info that I can use to argue with the other gamers I run into. It's also useful having helpful hardware recommendations—from what I've read, I have compiled a master "wish list" of gaming equipment I hope to acquire in the future. By the way, my parents love that one, too!

Thanks for the info and entertainment.

James Cross

BORING INSIDER STUFF

Your podcast about Jeff Gerstmann from GameSpot (GFWRadio.1UP.com) was very insightful and well done. I also appreciate Jeff Green's editorial about your rating system (*GFW* #14, pg. 10). It's truly nice that your magazine is not afraid to call it like you see it, and I hope this magazine is able to maintain its more independent voice. The game reviewing/publishing industry is in a rather strange state, with you all being funded by the companies whose products you rate. I hope that they (the major game publishers) realize that if readers feel that they aren't getting honest opinions, they will just assume you guys are shills, no better than a marketing department. This will make us ignore good ratings even if a game truly deserves it, which in the end hurts their sales. Your review of a game like *Crysis* was much more spot on than a certain major competitor who gave it a 98 percent...and you know what, I still went out and bought the game. GASP!

DJ

WE'RE STILL FRIENDS!

I have friends that I can rely on for reviews of places to eat, music, et cetera. I thought we were friends. You guys have been pushing *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* for quite awhile, and the price was right, as I was looking for something new to play. Where to start? Long load times, a system hog (and yet grainy-looking graphics at the same time), and more importantly, disappointing gameplay. The point-and-click text interface is more suited for an adventure game. Lotsa needless wandering around, limited health resources—you get the point. I gotta say, you guys fooled me—I will be more selective in the future.

Tony Pilasiewicz

Write us at gfwletters@ziffdavis.com. ●

FOR THE RECORD

In our 52 Free Games feature from *GFW* #15 (February 2008), we incorrectly listed the number of maps that *Command & Conquer: Renegade* mod *Red Alert: A Path Beyond* features. *C&C* geeks, take note: *A Path Beyond* includes a whopping 19 full maps. We apologize for this error.

MAIL BYTES

I noticed in the January issue of *GFW*, the review failed to mention the optional over-the-shoulder camera view—personally I love it and use it because I heard others prefer it as well, so I just thought everyone should at least know about it.

Nick Simpson

While the benefits of switching to the metric system are obvious, I don't see any benefit to scoring differently than everyone else. It's just a minor annoyance.

Jose Pacheco

Any news about a "little" game called *Counter-Strike*? Seems like Valve is forgetting about one of its best games.

Dmitry P.

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Start

News, Previews, and Pert Opinion

Hero Ricardo Vega commands Titan mechs and Orca gunships.

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PC in the Middle East

To fight is to fail in games focusing on the Israel-Palestine conflict.

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Mirror's Edge

Run from a foe you can't beat in DICE's first-person Parkour project.

TRENDS

Little Kids, Big Business

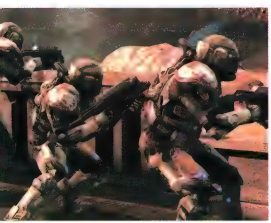
Are free, online-only games like *MapleStory* remaking the market?

24

TIBERIUM

Command & Conquer gets a new perspective—again

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** DEVELOPER: **EALA** GENRE: **Tactical First-Person Shooter** RELEASE DATE: **Fall 2008**



Tiberium art director Steve Burg also contributed to *The Matrix*'s conceptual designs.

PREVIEW

Tom Clancy games nearly corner the tactical-shooter market. While some popular franchises occasionally poke around the subgenre's seemingly fertile ground (see: *Star Wars: Republic Commando*), if your name isn't *Ghost Recon*, the row's tough to hoe. Undaunted, EA is looking to carve out its own chunk of real estate next door to the house that Clancy built by bringing its popular *Command & Conquer* franchise back into a first-person environment with *Tiberium*.

Taking place after the events of *Command & Conquer 3*, *Tiberium* puts players in the boots of forward commander Ricardo Vega, a predictably reluctant hero wielding a transforming four-in-one weapon to devastating effect against the Scrin, an alien nemesis introduced in *C&C 3*. Drawing on GDI troops, armor, and air support, executive producer Chris Plummer and the team at EALA aim to stage pitched battles while exploring the mythology of *C&C*'s mysterious *Tiberium*—a powerful resource that is as tempting as it is destructive.

Under the imposing shadow of an alien tower in the ruined Mediterranean, players command customizable forces against enemies both familiar and new. Unlike most other tactical shooters, *Tiberium* allows you to field troops best suited to the enemies you encounter at any given moment. "Think of your squads as weapons," Plummer says. "You choose where they go or fight. Elite infantry squads, Titan UCPs—armored walkers—and Orca close-air-support units are at your disposal, as well as heavy weapon strikes.

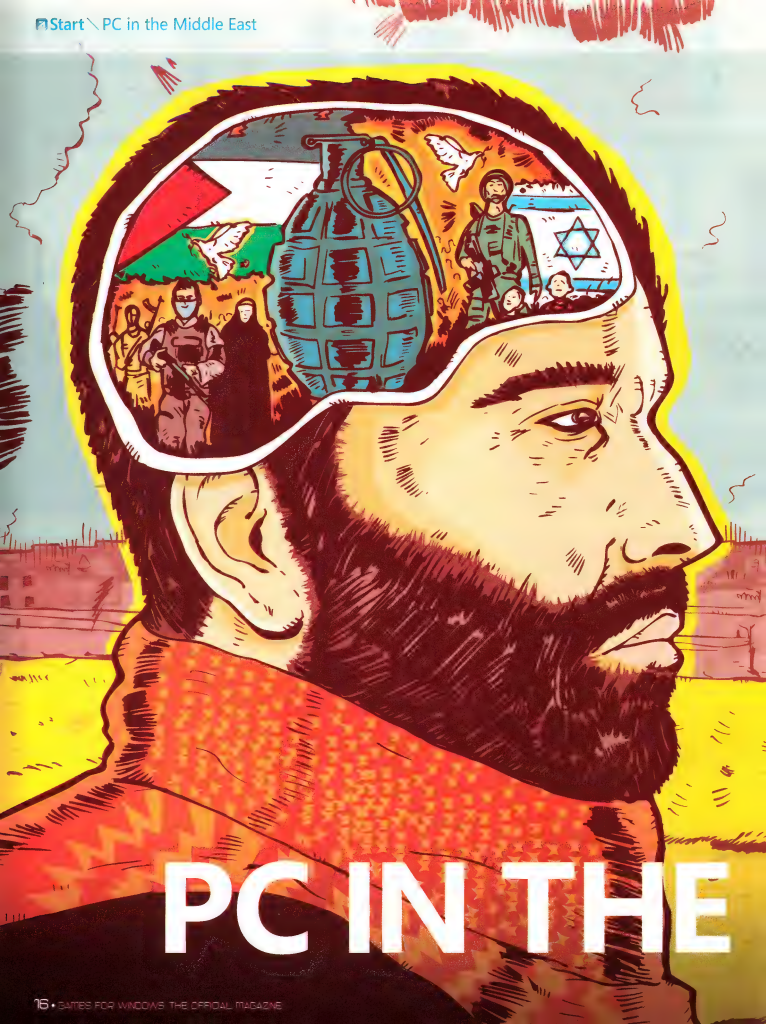
"Additionally, players are equipped with a Battle Control Uplink, which is an on-demand interactive map of the mission area. A simple squad-control interface gives you the power to issue instantaneous tactical orders with a single button press, but you're also able to issue move and attack orders to any squad by using the BCU map. [The latter option] is particularly useful for remote commanding squads that are beyond visual range, or for setting squads up for flanking moves." At the same time—and here's where EA's game and some of the more real-world tactical shooters on the market part ways—*Tiberium* emphasizes guns-blazing warfare.

Scrin Archons look a lot like *Halo*'s Hunters.

This new *C&C* shooter will naturally draw comparisons to 2002's *Command & Conquer: Renegade*, a largely forgettable FPS featuring a surprisingly good multiplayer mode that offers the strategy of *C&C* with the immediacy of an action game. While comparing that title to *Tiberium* may seem like a stretch, strategy and action elements dovetailed with GDI-themed conflict is a potentially cool prospect.

THE SPIN-OFF FACTOR

EALA's *Tiberium* team is interested in remaining faithful to the roots of the franchise and insists that tactics involve more than simple move and shoot orders. Sometimes putting players in command of up to six squads at once, *Tiberium* sits in the complicated middle ground between traditional tactical shooters and an FPS/RTS amalgam, but it isn't overemphasizing the safety of constant concealment and cover. Vega is a key asset on the battlefield, aided by his transforming weapon that can go from sniper rifle to assault rifle to grenade launcher to multiple missile launcher as the situation demands. You're the hero unit, the big force on the battlefield, and your support staff is just that: support. While you'll often have them at your disposal, sometimes it's just you, your transforming rifle, and an alien menace. Whether this second effort to see the *Command & Conquer* series through a first-person perspective will be more successful than the last remains to be seen. But in the vacuum between new RTSes, it's nice to have some *C&C* action to look forward to. **Sean Sands**



PC IN THE

CULTURE

As far as games go, the Middle East is the new Russia. The Arab world's got it all: gorgeous landscapes, sprawling architecture, and political turmoil perfect for plot devices. No wonder so many Middle Eastern–themed games have flooded the market in recent years, from *Battlefield 2* and *Call of Duty 4* to *America's Army* and *Kuma\War*.

There's one thing these games have in common: combat. Explosions, mayhem, flushing out terrorists, liberating the innocent—you know the drill. It's always the same, "us versus them," the basic gameplay interchangeable with all the other shooters you've played a dozen times before—this time just slapped with a fresh desert skin and some looped audio of the morning call to prayer.

Few games actually address the political issues behind the violence. It's not that *America's Army* or its ilk treat international peace as something unobtainable or impossible. It's that these games don't even find it worth considering in the first place; it's beside the point, a digital MacGuffin.

Some game developers have started to take a more thoughtful, intellectual stance toward videogames set in and about the Middle East, particularly those focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In these titles, victory doesn't come from the barrel of a gun, but from more realistic measures: a well-worded speech, cleverly negotiated treaties, and hard-fought compromise.

PEACEMAKER: PLAYING THE POLITICS

Take ImpactGames' *PeaceMaker*, a turn-based strategy game that simulates the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Assuming the role of either the Israeli prime minister or the Palestinian Authority president, you must navigate the region's treacherous political landscape, making policy decisions that could potentially ease tensions in the area—or make them worse. Your ultimate goal: a lasting >

ILLUSTRATIONS BY BRIAN TAYLOR

MIDDLE EAST

Think you could negotiate peace better than politicians? Boot up your PC and give it a shot

Below: an aerial view of Jerusalem in *Global Conflicts: Palestine*.

A member of the *PeaceMaker* team shows off his game to a student at the Carnegie Mellon campus in Doha, Qatar.

DOUMA—SUPER STREET FIGHTER: ARAB VERSION

Last November, the online game *Douma* (or "puppet"), a satirical *Street Fighter* clone featuring several major Lebanese politicians battling in cartoony death-matches, became a huge hit across the Lebanese blogosphere.

Players could choose from seven avatars, or "chefs," each equipped with his own special signature move. For instance, pro-Iranian Hezbollah party member Hassan Haj Hassan could fire Katyusha rockets at his foes, while Parliamentary Majority Leader Saad Hariri, one of the richest people in the world, called forth handfuls of gold bullion to rain on his opponents.

But not everyone got *Douma*'s joke. The game lasted all of one day before it was taken down due to "legality problems." *Douma*'s creator, Ziad Feghali, insists that he removed the game due to copyright-infringement problems and not political pressure. Right.

Feghali remains coy on when *Douma* might reappear. After the game was removed, he told Lebanese newspaper *The Daily Star*, "We are working on it, and fast; we're just looking for the right way to do it."

peace agreement and the establishment of a Palestinian state.

Easier said than done. Each move you make has consequences, both at home and abroad. Say Palestinian suicide bombers have attacked a public market, killing dozens of innocent bystanders. If, as the Israeli prime minister, you order the military to retaliate, you risk kindling even more violence (as well as inviting international criticism). But if you don't bring out the troops, you anger your own party—and maybe even get kicked out of office.

Likewise, if, as the Palestinian president, you assassinate the militants' ringleaders, you might curry favor with the Israelis, but the move is sure to make you unpopular among some of your own people. It might even spark the Third Intifada.

Thus, like real diplomacy, *PeaceMaker* requires players to dance between extremes by constantly compromising, negotiating, and thinking about what's best for everyone in the long term. "Because of that, we find that people really internalize a lot of these issues," says Eric Brown, CEO of ImpactGames. "They come away saying, 'In that two-to-four-hour experience, I learned more than I did reading the news for however many years.'"

Using real news photos and video, *PeaceMaker* stitches together a realistic storyline out of your decisions, illustrating the stacking consequences of your actions. But the poignant (and often graphic) footage also reminds you that somewhere in the world, people like you are forced to make choices like these every day—and they can't turn off the computer when they're done.

Last November, to coincide with the Mideast Peace Summit in Maryland, ImpactGames teamed up with the Peres Center for Peace to give away 100,000 free copies of *PeaceMaker* in Israel and the West Bank. Complimentary copies of the game were also given to Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas.

"There just hasn't been a lot of effort to get each side to understand the other's perspective," Brown says. "Anything that comes at it from a different angle, that gives another chance to engage in dialogue, is worth doing."

BEHIND THE STORY WITH GLOBAL CONFLICTS: PALESTINE

Think *making* the policy decisions is hard? Try interpreting them for millions of readers.

You have to do just that in the 2007 adventure game *Global Conflicts: Palestine*, the debut title from Danish developer Serious Games Interactive.

You play a freelance reporter freshly arrived in Jerusalem, eager to cover the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and prove your worth as a journalist. Through six missions, you must investigate newsworthy events and assemble the best, most compelling article you can, balancing objectivity with compassion, facts with eloquence.

As you sniff the city for leads, you interview townspeople, militants, and soldiers to get quotes for your big story. At the end of each mission, you peruse those quotes and choose the best while also picking the headline and photos that will accompany your article in print. Your story is then graded on the strength of your research and—interestingly—the bias of the newspaper to which you submitted it (you can choose from Israeli, Palestinian, and European outlets).

But you must be careful what you print. While a heavily slanted article in a biased newspaper may net you more readership, it also risks pissing off your contacts, making it harder for you to get quotes and interviews for future stories.

As a journalist in *Global Conflicts: Palestine*, you interview soldiers and citizens.

"ONE HAS TO BE VERY CAREFUL IN TERMS OF HOW TO PRESENT THESE ISSUES IT IS A RISKY PATH TO PURSUE"

At the same time, however, watching from the sidelines as your interviewees suffer through air raids, checkpoint hassles, and even become martyrs—or their victims—may be too much for you. It's hard not to want to help your friends any way you can.

"One has to be very careful in terms of how to present these issues," says Mikkel Overby, commercial director for Serious Games Interactive. "It is a risky path to pursue.

"Some Jews and some Arabs have found the game to be biased." Fortunately, however, it's "in opposite directions—which confirms to us that we present both sides of the story."

Global Conflicts: Palestine is like gonzo journalism in pixelated form—you're not only inside the story, you *create* the story; to millions of your fictional readers, if you don't report it, it didn't happen. The game illustrates not just the political nuances of the conflict, but also the incredible power and responsibility journalists have over their subject matter—something not often addressed in discussions of the Middle East.

In fact, although the game was originally created with Danish school children in mind, some have used *Global Conflicts: Palestine* to train new journalists, Overby says, as well as in teaching conflict resolution skills and how to work with juvenile delinquents.

PEACE AS A POSSIBILITY

Will videogames bring peace to the Middle East? Of course not. But they can help promote it by opening up minds to new and different perspectives—and reminding people that peace is still a possibility.

"Someone wrote to us from Israel, saying they'd been working in the peace process for a long time, and that they didn't realize until they'd won our game that they'd never really internalized that there *could* be an end to the conflict," Brown says. "Just that act of winning made them think, for the first time, that it was truly possible."

It's the inherent nature of videogames—their interactivity and ability to represent complex systems with several variables—that makes such a breakthrough possible, says Brown.

"Videogames do things that other media can't, like allowing people to explore at their own pace or representing multiple perspectives," he says. "It's not about the visceral—it's about the engagement and the challenge."

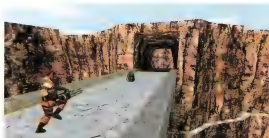
PEEKING AT THE FUTURE OF THE MIDDLE EAST

Ed Halter, author of *From Sun Tzu to Xbox: War and Videogames* and an Islamogaming expert, thinks the next big breakthrough in the genre will be allowing gamers to play non-Western characters. "I'd be interested to see games in the American and European market where you can play the Middle Eastern perspective. A combat game, even," he says. "Playing a non-Western character is like the last big taboo."

That innovation, he says, already has its roots in the strategy genre, with games like *PeaceMaker*. "There's a much larger history of playing 'the other side' in strategy games. It's not as much of a taboo. Can it go beyond strategy games? We'll see."

Brown agrees, adding that this latest crop of high-minded Middle Eastern–themed games aren't evidence of a new movement, but rather a reawakening of an old one. "Look back at games like *Diplomacy* or *Balance of Power*," he says. "The very beginning of games was intellectual. And it's drifted away from that, but I think it'll come back—our game reflects that—and, hopefully, the genre will grow." **Lara Crigger**

• *TF2*'s new Goldrush map evolves the escort mission gameplay of *TFC*'s Hunted mode.



• Top: Valve's Badlands map in *Team Fortress Classic*. Bottom: the *TF2* makeover.

NEW YEAR, NEW TEAM FORTRESS 2 MAPS

Cocreator Robin Walker talks about *Team Fortress 2's* February content

INTERVIEW

GFW: Original *Team Fortress* map Badlands was a rocket-, concussion-, and pipe-jumper's paradise. Will the remake preserve that?

ROBIN WALKER, COCREATOR: We definitely wanted to preserve the feeling of useful vertical space that was prevalent in the original map. The capture points on either side of the middle are placed on tall spires to encourage players to deal with these kinds of spaces, and the middle point has multiple routes, both high and low.

While Heavies, Medics, Pyros, and other classes can run up the spires on the path that runs around it, Soldiers, Demomen, and Scouts can take advantage of their movement abilities to get there in a hurry. This ends up being incredibly important to winning on this map.

GFW: Do you ever debate designing to encourage double-rocket-jumps, especially now that you have health pickups to place high up where jumpers are likely to land?

RW: Originally there was a lot of fear as to how much the Scout's double-jump would break maps, but in most cases, pulling off some of the trickier jumps required skill, so we ended up building in very few constraints to his movement. In the case of the Solider and Demoman, they can get to pretty much any space in any of the maps using their weapons if they are willing to trade some health for it.

GFW: And the other new map/mode? Is it in any way adapted from *Team Fortress Classic* favorites such as Hunted or Murderball?

RW: Goldrush has very close ties to Hunted, where we started with the goal of making the inherent gameplay of the original Hunted come through without some of the problems that map had when played on most public servers. Hunted was a great level when played on a LAN or with a group of people you knew, but finding a person that was both willing and able to play as the Hunted caused it to break down in public play in a variety of ways. In Goldrush we have a mining cart that moves through the level based on the proximity of the offense to it, which creates a Hunted-style escort requirement. Unlike maps like Dustbowl and Gravelpit, playing defense on Goldrush means that you constantly have to change the area that you're defending, including making the choice [to] allow the offense to progress into traps you've set for them.

GFW: Avanti, another map from *TFC*, seems especially suited to *TF2*. Thoughts?

RW: When we started bringing some of the maps forward from *TFC* we looked at what people were still playing on the *TFC* servers, and that data drove the ones we brought forward. Avanti didn't really make the grade, but Hunted or Hunted-style gameplay is something people are asking us about a lot. Goldrush is our first step in that direction, but it doesn't necessarily mean we won't do a straight remake of the original gameplay, where a person *is* controlling the object that is trying to move through the map.

GFW: A year or so ago you expressed interest in creating new classes along the lines of the Spy and Engineer. Is this pie-in-the-sky stuff or something you're still pursuing?

RW: Still pursuing. • **Shawn Elliott**

[GEEKED AT BIRTH.]

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"You do not learn or gain new abilities per se," says senior producer Owen O'Brien. "That always feels forced to me. In theory, you can do all the moves at the start of the game."

MIRROR'S EDGE

DICE's new perspective on perspective

PUBLISHER: **EA Games** DEVELOPER: **DICE** GENRE: **First-Person Action** RELEASE DATE: **2008**

PREVIEW

"Have you seen *Run Lola Run*?" I ask Owen O'Brien, senior producer of DICE's *Mirror's Edge*. In the 1998 German film, flame-haired Lola makes a mad dash through the city to get cash to her criminal boyfriend—starting over every 20 minutes when she fails as if she's holding 1UP mushrooms. In *Mirror's Edge*, protagonist Faith does an awful lot of running, too—and leaping, climbing, and deft acrobatics—not to save her boyfriend, but to save a dying counterculture from its oppressors. "Yes, I have," O'Brien replies, "and the answer to your implied question is also 'yes'—it was an influence."

Mirror's Edge seems like a convergence of influences, really—both external and internal to the Sweden-based developer. *Prince of Persia* and parkour ("a recreational pursuit in which participants traverse urban structures by running, jumping, vaulting, rolling, etc." according to *Webster's New Millennium Dictionary*) make for good shorthand, but the game's uncharacteristically first-person. Attribute that to DICE's past output, primarily the first-person *Battlefield* series, and a desire to build on studio strengths...while appealing to a whole other sort of audience who might not be interested in planes, tanks, and the enumeration of rifles.

Edge sells its illusion by constructing a more complete picture of what it's like on the inside looking out—Faith's limbs are visible when and where you'd think they'd be, certainly, but movement completes the trick. "Ironically, it wasn't the acrobatic maneuvers that proved most challenging—it was the more common moves like simply jogging, running, and sprinting in a realistic manner. These are the things everyone has a point of reference for, so when they don't feel correct, it's most obvious."

With the possible exception of *Metroid Prime*, which made first-person platforming tolerable through a deliberately slow, floaty double-jump, I'm hard pressed to come up with a game that successfully blended first-person and even half-satisfying acrobatics. "Up until now, I would agree that *Metroid* [*Prime*] is the best execution of jumping in first-person," says O'Brien. "However, we go way beyond that. You do not need double jumps or slowing of movement. Speed is not a barrier—it is an asset."

The illusion of speed's not complete without the consequences of momentum—something that most FPS games ignore completely. (*Half-Life 2*'s crawl across the ruined undercarriage of a bridge got the vertigo right, but certainly not the feel.) But rather than fight it, DICE embraces it. "It's the fuel that powers your moves," says O'Brien. "You need to gain enough momentum to pull off certain moves, and maintaining momentum is the key to chaining moves together—which in turn opens up new routes for you through levels."

It's easy to see a powerfully convincing illusion in *Mirror's Edge*—but it's also easy to picture this falling flat on its face, concrete to camera. "There is a very real preconception that this sort of movement won't work in first-person," says O'Brien. "You have to see it, play it, and feel it to realize how intuitive and fun it is." ● **Sean Molloy**

> "THERE IS A PRECONCEPTION THAT THIS SORT OF MOVEMENT WILL NOT WORK IN FIRST-PERSON."
>
> –OWEN O'BRIEN, SENIOR PRODUCER, DICE

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LITTLE KIDS, BIG BUSINESS

You're not playing them, but these MMOs are the future

TRENDS

I've been chasing snails for two hours. I'm still not sure why.

It's not that I'm lost. I've been here before. I know the drill. I'm in the grind. But instead of stopping a Tolkienesque bad guy from taking over the world, I'm crushing the shells of blue snails and delivering bowls of salad to security guards named Luke. Why? So I can get enough in-game money to buy a cool baseball hat.

Of course, the sunglasses I want to go with them will cost me actual, real money....

WELCOME TO MAPLESTORY

MapleStory is the lead dog in the hunt for MMO players too young to drive. While few Americans over the age of 18 have heard of it, *MapleStory*'s publisher, Nexon, claims to have 72 million registered accounts, including a third of South Korea's population and 4 million players in the United States (the game launched in North America in 2005).

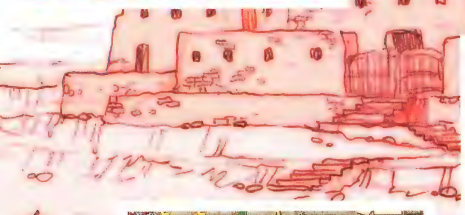
A seemingly simple 2D side-scroller, *MapleStory* consists of the same basic jumping, running, and hitting things with sticks that has defined videogames since *Super Mario Bros.*, albeit with the statistics, levels, and loot typical of an MMO. But unlike typical MMOs, *MapleStory*'s constant chatter largely revolves around idiotic parents (a perennial topic of any generation) and how those new hot-pink pants make Janisaya look totally off-the-hook. (In this case, Janisaya is the character of a self-identified 13-year-old girl, and the pants in question are a symbol of Nexon's genius.)

MapleStory is free. During my time in the game, I've never been denied access to a piece of content. No doors are labeled "subscribers only"; no levels are off-limits.

But I *looked* boring, a sure sign I was either a 40-year-old imposter or some poor schlub who couldn't scrape together $10 to get a Nexon cash card from Target and do a little bling shopping. I mean, come on: If I were the average American player of *MapleStory*, I'd spend over 40 hours per month in the game, mostly socializing, and I'd clearly need better stuff. If only I could get a nice hat or a cool dog—then I'd really be somebody!

That I won't become a 40-hour-a-month player isn't a surprise to Nexon. "Our largest age group [of players] is actually 17 years old," says Min Kim, director of game operations for Nexon America. And those 17-year-olds aren't playing *MapleStory* for the deep storyline and compelling gameplay. They're not necessarily *playing* at all. "MySpace and Facebook are just about people looking around on the Internet," Kim says. "But now they're living on the Internet. People are the content for other people. We just provide the tools."

• Schoolkids [illegible] the importance of [illegible] virtual consumption



• **Only Department of Defense mainframes have the power to operate the graphics-intensive *RuneScape* (left) and *Dizzywood* (right).**

And those tools are what Nexon charges for: tickets to virtual events, friendship bracelets, or boxes of virtual chocolates. And where a virtual marriage is a fun little headline in the local *World of WarCraft* gazette, it's a cottage industry inside *MapleStory*. "Having couples in the game was very popular, so we decided to make it real," Kim says. Nexon built an entire system around it, complete with quest lines, rewards, and content areas. And, of course, they charge for the good stuff. "We have a cathedral-style wedding and a Vegas-style wedding with an Elvis impersonator." With over $250 million in annual revenue, Nexon's ersatz Elvis has clearly found an audience.

GRINDING GOBLINS AT THE INTERNET KIOSK

By contrast, the other gorilla in the kids-MMO jungle brings the old-school RPG to the just-home-from-school player. *RuneScape*, the ambitious work of British publisher Jagex, has over 9 million subscribers, and more than 1 million pay $5 a month for premium access.

For Jagex, an MMO must be about more than just creating a social environment for teenagers. "There are different kinds of players," says Niall O'Malley, >

ROMPER ROOM

If *MapleStory* and *RuneScape* are *Second Life* and *World of WarCraft* for teens on a budget, the world of alternative MMOs gets even weirder when you drop into the land of Neopets.

More virtual world than game, Neopets gives players ownership of a creature and then makes them feel guilty about not treating it well. Taking care of your Neopet (mine's named "PlumeGodfrey") takes time, energy, and, of course, lots of stuff. While players of the "free" game get boring old books to read so their pets and bed-wetting food, truly savvy keepers purchase homes, clothing, toys, and faeries for their virtual pets. Of course, to do all that you need to do one of several things: play lots and lots of minigames on the website, invest in the virtual stock market, or perform any of a dozen other activities which ultimately mean you're seeing ads. Or you can pay for a "premium" account and avoid the ads.

As an eyeball-catching maneuver, Neopets is modestly incarnate. Your pace perversely fast, so you force yourself to play one more round of Tuxo Time to acquire enough Neopoints to buy Neosoup for your Neopet. And then you go to the Neostore to buy some nice Neotems, only to find out that the store is out of food. So you'll have to hit refresh a few dozen times until you can make good on your promise to not let the little guy starve to death. Every corner of the Neopets experience is designed to enter this kind of constant grinding and evil genius. It's a trade-off every *World of WarCraft* player knows well—the indefatigable lure of the grind.

So Neopets (owned by Viacom after a $160 million deal in 2005) has happed on the virtual goods Sandiwagon, too, connecting with the grand masters of the model, Nexon. Viacom hired Nexon to create a clone of the virtual mall that dominates Nexon's *MapleStory* experience.

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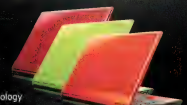

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Jagex's head of corporate communications. "There's an achievement player who wants to level, the story player who wants to experience the mythology of the universe, and the social player who wants to be part of a group. We try to serve all three."

Jagex serves players by delivering a game that has all the trappings of the big-boy MMOs but can be played in the web browser of almost any computer with an Internet connection. Despite the technical simplicity, *RuneScape* offers all of the traditional hardcore RPG elements that *MapleStory* forgoes in favor of Elvis impersonators and baggy pants. That means stat-mongering, farming, grinding, and endless crafting—but also PVP, a solid clan system, and a remarkably rich, lore-filled world.

Of course, charging for a kids' game creates a new hurdle—getting kids deep enough into the game that they'll bug their parents for the cash to continue playing it. Like *MapleStory* and virtually every other kid-targeted MMO, you *can* play *RuneScape* for free. Those who don't pay to play get about 100 hours of content and a limited range of items, monsters, quests, and minigames. But subscribers get the good stuff, including expanded features more in line with big-kid MMOs.

• **Vegas kitsch, marriage licenses, and Slurpees in MMO *MapleStory*'s brandscape.**

THESE ARE THE GAMES THAT THE NEXT GENERATION OF MMO PLAYERS ARE CUTTING THEIR TEETH ON.

GETTING DIZZY WITH IT

After a few weeks with two behemoths of the MMO training-wheels industry, I was struck by a lack of innocence. As a parent, the thought of my kids playing either game left me more saddened than excited. *MapleStory*, while bright and cheerful and, in its own way, well-designed, seems to come with a side order of jaded sauce from the moment a new player arrives: essentially, pay up or be a loser. And while *RuneScape* captures the gameplay of hardcore MMOs, it lacks the joy and wonder of bigger, more expensive games.

But then I discovered *Dizzywood*. A straightforward subscription-based fantasy-MMO project from fledgling developer Rocket Paper Scissors, *Dizzywood* aims for the tween market, competing more with *Neopets* and Disney's *Club Penguin* than *MapleStory*. But they're trying to bring this youngest of MMO markets something unique: an actual story-driven multiplayer experience.

"We're focused on story and game mechanics," explains Scott Arpajian, president of Rocket Paper Scissors. "When you look at most of the other [kids'] games, they're typically menu-driven experiences: You're in a chat room or you're in a minigame." *Dizzywood*'s model turns this on its head. While there *are* minigames and chat, they're pushed into positions of less importance and deeper integration so that what comes through is the world—a world and storyline, while board-book simple, endearing and innocent in a way that few videogames manage for any age group. Instead of the stats and grinding of *RuneScape*, *Dizzywood* characters earn "achievements"—awards and items that convey skills and abilities much more in line with old-school adventure games than *World of WarCraft*.

The team behind *Dizzywood* has a key advantage—it's a venture capital–funded scrappy upstart. Starting as the archetypal "three guys in a basement" a year ago, they're now holed up with a real development team in San Francisco, closing funding rounds while hammering out code and bingeing on Jolt. Because the presentation of the game can be relatively simple (like most games in the genre, it's browser-based), Rocket Paper Scissors has been able to focus on technology geared to a more important market: parents. "Worlds for kids face an interesting issue," Arpajian says. "You have to deliver, first and foremost, an absolutely compelling experience for kids," he says. "But you also have to create a world that appeals to parents."

To do that, Rocket Paper Scissors has to ensure that the environment is safe, controlled, and even beneficial. They implemented a system for live moderators to view myriad feeds of chat and activity from behind "control room" screens, using filtering and analytical software to point out where human monitoring—or even intervention—is most needed.

They're developing a "report card" system that will give parents feedback on what their kids are doing in the game—not only to keep them out of trouble, but also to provide a basis for dinner-table discussion about the logic, language, and story of the game. And the game's creative design is constructed to be subtly educational and enriching, not merely time-wasting. These may seem like baby steps, but they're the kinds of small innovations that move an industry forward. Moreover, the bottom-up focus on simply building a good game is refreshing.

THE SHINY MIRROR OF CHILDHOOD

While it's easy to dismiss MMOs geared toward kids, we should still pay attention. The market for $15-a-month subscription fees with semiannual expansion packs clearly isn't infinite. Charging real money for virtual goods or gameplay buffs, while anathema to some hardcore MMO purists, is an idea that's here to stay. The market for these games continues to grow, evidenced by massive investments from players like Disney (*Club Penguin*) and Viacom (*Neopets*), each with its own recipe for extracting money from kids and their parents.

"These kinds of games can be seen as a template for the future of the MMO industry," claims Michael Zenke, editor at MMO websites Massively.com and MMOGNation.com. "In five years, the idea of everybody paying the same amount for their content is going to seem like crazy talk."

We may not like it, but these are the games that the next generation of MMO players are cutting their teeth on. Just as many of today's adult MMO players came from the gold-box RPGs of the late '80s and early '90s expecting a certain kind of game, so too will this crop of tweens start storming "our" turf with expectations fostered by *Dizzywood* and *MapleStory*.

I just hope they keep Elvis out of Azeroth.

• **Julian Murdoch**

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PREVIEW

You know a publisher's filed for creative bankruptcy when it dusts off a decades-old franchise and applies an edgy, modern, and often legacy-ignorant spin. Vivendi Games (the current caretaker of old-school adventure kingpin Sierra's desiccated corpse) pulled this very trick with 2004's *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*, and the game did gangbusters—mostly because, well, sex sells. No accounting for taste, though: In stark contrast to the classic *Larry* adventure games' comparatively sophisticated and risqué sense of adult humor, *Magna Cum Laude* opted for lurid, juvenile, just-this-side-of-a-porno dialogue and gameplay punctuated with ridiculous minigames to conceal its own epic failure at telling an entertaining and substantive story. In more concise (and apt) terminology, it *sucked balls*.

So, who's ready for a sequel?

OK, let's not blow the...whistle...just yet. With the upcoming *Leisure Suit Larry: Box Office Bust*, Vivendi and developer Team17 (*Worms*) promise plenty of content fit for an adventure game—including but not limited to "exploration, platforming, racing, and puzzle-solving" (yes, the platforming and the racing *clearly* outrank the puzzle-solving in this genre)—and *Larry* executive producer John Melchior (though not series creator Al Lowe, who remains sadly uninvolved with the series' modern-day revival) promises no repeats of *Magna Cum Laude*'s myriad mistakes, calling this collaboration "a new team, new developer, and new direction."

This "new direction" once again centers on lecherous moron Larry Lovage—*not* his iconic uncle and original series star, Larry Laffer—who bags various Tinseltown babes at the up-and-coming Laffer Studios while helping Unca Larry ferret out a mole within the ranks. We can expect movie parodies aplenty, aided by the comic stylings of *Grandma's Boy* screenwriter Allen Covert and the voice talent of washed-up celebrities like Carmen Electra and Shannon Elizabeth. Yeah, yeah—so what keeps this game from sinking to the same explicit nether regions as its awful predecessor?

> WHAT KEEPS THIS GAME FROM SINKING TO THE SAME NETHER REGIONS AS ITS PREDECESSOR?

"*Laude* [took] the easy way out, using shock humor that left players more stunned than entertained. The script made Larry more predator than lovable loser," Melchior says. "The first thing we did is remove the nudity. We're making a game based on humor and gameplay mechanics [rather than] the shock value of nudity—which is historically used to mask poor gameplay. The second thing we did is to bring Larry back to the 'lovable loser' status: a guy, not unlike any of us, who's just trying to find a girl and do the right thing. Unfortunately for him, he can't seem to get either right."

Given that we're seeing a second *Leisure Suit Larry* game that: a) doesn't involve Lowe, b) employs what's possibly the most hideous art style ever glimpsed in a videogame (check out those screens), c) emphasizes what sounds like a fair amount of minigame content (judging from Vivendi's company line, anyway), and d) comes from a publisher with a track record of ineptitude and disrespect for classic franchises (see 2006's sparse Sierra boxed sets for more proof), we're wondering if Melchior's last statement doubles as a pertinent metaphor for where this game's headed. At least Team17—a studio known for its humorous games—is a step up from *Magna Cum Laude* developer High Voltage Software. But that doesn't change the fact that they're working with severely damaged goods. **Ryan Scott**

CLICK AND PLAY

InstantAction in your web browser

PREVIEW

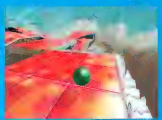
GarageGames' InstantAction—a service that delivers on-demand game content in a web browser—recently set the Internet abuzz with rumors of a new *Tribes* game. But according to Garage Games CEO Josh Williams, all is not as it seems: "For the record, we don't have access to any part of the *Tribes* brand. Honestly, we wouldn't want to simply rehash *Tribes*, anyway." That's not to say that the pedigree isn't inspiring one particular upcoming title from the company—whose staff is composed of folks from Dynamix, the now-defunct developer of the Tribes franchise—but InstantAction is bigger than any one game.

According to Williams, InstantAction is "Xbox Live Arcade meets YouTube"—less Flash gaming with a twist than a developer-friendly platform with the potential to deliver high-quality games. "We're taking what's greatest about triple-A games and fusing that with the accessibility of the Web. $60 PC epics sold at retail stores may or may not thrive in the long term, but fun games of all kinds will be found on [the platform] and through all kinds of new channels. That's awesome."

InstantAction's initial games lineup is ambitious for in-browser technology, but perhaps a little uninspired—so far, titles that have appeared in places like Xbox Live Arcade dominate. **Sean Sands**

While GarageGames is still working out the specifics on its pricing models, InstantAction offers some appealing ideas with a system that rewards play with tokens that grant access to new games or even early access to upcoming games.

MARBLE BLAST ONLINE



The popular Xbox Live Arcade game *Marble Blast Ultra* is the flagship title for InstantAction's launch lineup—probably because this simple but addictive game is the safest bet of the bunch. Its hazardous environments (rain-glazed ramps, slippery ice fields, power-up pads, and occasionally infuriating bumpers) provide action-angled puzzle-solving in single-player and a dangerous arena of spherical mayhem for up to eight players.

THINH TANHS

Think Tanks has been around for a number of years and has earned respect as a casual indie-pendent title. A pool artist game—don't let the name fool you—this is "shoot or be shot" in its purest form. *Think Tanks* serves up seven up-to-eight-gamepiece that pit up to eight projectile-shooting doomboddist brains against one another.

UNANNOUNCED TITLE

A late-December video leak reignited interest in work on a potential GarageGames-developed *Tribes* game, but the company has toyed with a ruinweed *Tribes*-like project since 2006. CEO Josh Williams isn't quite ready to pull back the veil on the way yet, confessing in vague terms that they are working on something along these lines. "As players, many of us have lots of things about *Tribes* that we want to capture in the game we're making now."

BLOOD BOWL

Football Slayer

PUBLISHER: **Focus Home Interactive** DEVELOPER: **Cyanide** GENRE: **Fantasy Sports/Strategy** RELEASE DATE: **2008**

PREVIEW

Football: dumbest thing ever. Football with orcs and fireballs: *totally awesome*. Games Workshop's tabletop board game *Blood Bowl*—a fantasy football analog to the company's *Warhammer* miniatures game—is a surprisingly popular pick for PC ports. SSI first ported *Blood Bowl* to MS-DOS in 1995, and rogue developer Cyanide created 2004's *Chaos League*. While not an official *Blood Bowl* port, *Chaos League* caused a stir thanks to its striking similarities, leading to a mysterious out-of-court settlement between Cyanide and Games Workshop...as well as a *Blood Bowl* videogame license for the former. And who says plagiarism doesn't pay?

Blood Bowl's basic premise plays out like football (that's *American* football, for all you crazy soccer hooligans out there). Two opposing teams squabble over a ball, scoring points by running it to the opposing team's end zone. Except you can throw lightning bolts and tear appendages from all the poor SOBs who get in your way. Eight fantasy races—ranging from your basic humans and dwarves to bizarro *Warhammer* folk like Skaven and Chaos—fill out *Blood Bowl*'s massive 60-team roster.

REAL-TIME SMASHING

Project manager and lead software engineer Antoine Villepreux cites two distinct gameplay modes. "In turn-based mode," Villepreux says, "you play the original board game, following the exact original rules. So you'll play your characters one by one, be prompted to make choices regarding rolled dice, there will be turnovers...and when picking characters, you'll have an overlay view of the board grid and cells."

Villepreux describes the new real-time mode as a tactical RTS sports game: "The original *Blood Bowl* rules apply, but without interruption. You have the camera view of an RTS game, and you control your players with the mouse, giving them orders like [in] *WarCraft*. It's faster, stressful, and intense; you have to control 11 players simultaneously and under constant pressure. It feels more like a sports game, but we've kept the tactical aspect [intact]."

One *Blood Bowl* hallmark that *ain't* intact, though, is the rampant corporate parodies. While the original board game spoofed everything from McDonald's to the Oakland Raiders, Cyanide's playing gun-shy, plastering in-game billboards with decidedly less-likely-to-offend fake ads—ironic, given the circumstances behind *Blood Bowl*'s rebirth. Hey, at least Cyanide's not taking the sketchy EA approach and dynamically offering that same white space to the highest bidder, right? ■**Ryan Scott**

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TRENDS

Since 2005, we've seen nine antivideogame bills and nine court challenges, each ending the same way: with state legislators licking their wounds, schooled by irritated judges on the finer points of the First Amendment. Even California's antigaming law, one of the oldest such pieces of legislation, recently struck out: In August 2007, the law, which would have fined retailers up to $1,000 for selling violent games to minors, was ruled unconstitutional.

You would think that lawmakers might catch on after awhile.

"We're long past the point where [legislators] can claim ignorance in the unconstitutionality of the matter," says Hal Halpin, president of gamer advocacy group Entertainment Consumers Association (ECA). "It's been tried, tested, and failed over half a dozen times."

But so far, failure hasn't stopped politicians from using the videogame issue to nickel-and-dime their constituents for more publicity and more votes. And it's been working—but that appears to be changing.

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE...

The California ruling (currently under appeal) hasn't stopped politicians in several other states from introducing fresh—and increasingly severe—antigaming legislation. Take the New York Safe Games Act of 2007. Not only would the bill require rating labels on all videogames (making the preexisting ESRB system redundant), but it would also make the sale of games with "depraved violence and indecent images" to minors a Class E felony, requiring a minimum penalty of one year in prison. Although the bill has stalled due to political infighting, New York Governor Eliot Spitzer (D) has encouraged state legislators to keep trying.

Why do these bills keep getting proposed? In a telling statement on his website, New York state Senator Andrew Lanza (R-Staten Island), who proposed the first version of the bill, traced his legislation back to the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings.

"The recent release of *V-Tech Massacre*, a sick game which exploits the Virginia Tech University [*sic*] tragedy, is a painful reminder of the culture of violence which has severe consequences on our youth and society," he argued. "It is imperative that we find a way to prevent these virtual realities from continuing to fuel and teach the violent behavior which is corrupting our youth."

Problem is, the game—actually named *V-Tech Rampage*, not *V-Tech Massacre*—would have been entirely unaffected by the Safe Games Act since it is an amateur-designed Internet Flash game and not a commercial release. *V-Tech Rampage* isn't even American-made; its creator is a 21-year-old living in Sydney, Australia.

Lanza isn't the only politician to rely on shoddy research to justify antigaming legislation. Spitzer drew fire late last year when he presented a

AT WORK

sensationalist antivideogame slideshow riddled with errors. Among other inaccuracies, Spitzer's presentation referred to *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* by the wrong name and claimed Virginia Tech shooter Seung-Hui Cho was a *Counter-Strike* aficionado (despite the Virginia Tech review panel finding no such evidence). The slideshow also listed Mothers Against Videogame Addiction and Violence, a known hoax group, as a resource for parents seeking more information (the reference was removed a few days later).

In defense of his state's failed "games-as-porn" law, Louisiana state Rep. Roy Burrell (D-District 2) invoked *Border Patrol* and *Kingdom of Loathing* as examples of the kinds of violent videogames from which children needed to be shielded. But *Border Patrol*, in which players gun down illegal immigrants crossing the Mexico-U.S. border, is also an Internet Flash game and falls outside the law's restrictions. *Kingdom of Loathing*? That's a satirical browser-based MMO featuring stick figures battling for piles of meat.

"The research is all very highly recycled," Halpin says. "They recycle statistics that are outdated; you see the exact same footage. It's one of the reasons we keep seeing images of *Doom*, a 15-year-old game, still resurfacing in testimony."

"Sometimes, I think [legislators] genuinely don't understand the difference between commercial and noncommercial games," says Dennis McCauley, editor of the catchall political blog GamePolitics.com (which is part of the ECA). "But sometimes they bring it up just to add a little hype and shock value to their argument, too."

AT WHAT COST?

The costs of that shock value are starting to add up. The Entertainment Software Association, the industry trade group spearheading these court contests, claims that as of 2007, it has recovered more than $1.71 million in legal fees from state governments, including $73,000 from Minnesota, $180,000 from Michigan, and a staggering $344,000 from Washington. In California, the ESA seeks compensation of more than $324,000.

As more court cases are decided, these legal fees have only gone up. In a 2007 interview with Law .com, Gail Markels, senior vice president and general counsel for the ESA, suggests that judges have shown increasing generosity when awarding the ESA compensation because "courts are starting to recognize these laws aren't constitutional from introduction, and there's no question they'll be stricken."

That mounting judicial frustration is clear in Judge James Brady's ruling on the 2006 Louisiana antigaming law. "Prior to the passage of the Act, there were a number of reported cases from a number of jurisdictions which held similar statutes to be unconstitutional," he wrote. "The Court wonders why nobody objected to the enactment of this statute. In this court's view, the taxpayers deserve more from their elected officials."

So why didn't any legislators object to the Louisiana law? "Unfortunately, it really boils >

down to publicity," Halpin says. "Getting that airtime, appearing to be 'for the children,' is an ill-conceived effort to sway the soccer-mom vote."

When other legislators agree to the law, he says, "Politicians think, 'I can't be the only guy voting against this, or else my opponents will put out mailers and press releases saying that he won't go along with the rest of us, that he won't 'vote for the children.'"

Even when the laws fail, Halpin says, lawmakers "are never really held responsible, apart from their local papers doing editorials." In the voters' eyes, wasting tax dollars by chasing the videogame boogeyman just can't compare to the larger issues, like health care or jobs. "Even a hardcore gamer would vote or not vote for someone based on other things," Halpin says.

CAMPAIGN POLITICS

However, as costs associated with these failed bills rise, that lack of accountability may be disappearing, argues McCauley. "You're starting to see it crop up in debates," he says. "People are starting to talk about taking a commonsense approach. You may not like *Manhunt 2*, but if your law is inevitably going to be shot down and cost the taxpayers lots of money, then the commonsense approach is to put your time where it could be better used."

Indeed, several former game-industry opponents have changed their tune, now working with the ESRB to raise parental awareness of the industry's rating system. Although Delaware state Representative Helene Keeley (D-Wilmington) once championed antigaming legislation in her state, even working alongside Jack Thompson to write her bill, in 2007 she appeared on billboards and mall kiosks promoting the ESRB ratings. Likewise, Oklahoma state Senator Glenn Coffee (R-District 30), who cosponsored his state's failed videogame law, now appears in radio and TV spots for the ESA. In addition, the attorneys general of Texas, Utah, Rhode Island, Idaho, and Georgia have all publicly endorsed the ESRB rating system and participated in ESA-funded public service announcement campaigns. Theirs is a smart political strategy, considering the ads allow participants to score face time with their constituents free of charge.

But these partnerships are only forming at the state level; on the national stage, violent videogames are as contentious an issue as ever. While Senators John Edwards (D-South Carolina) and Barack Obama (D-Illinois) hinted to Common Sense Media they'd let the videogame industry self-regulate, other 2008 presidential candidates have shown clear antigaming stances. Former governor Mitt Romney (R-Massachusetts) promises gaming regulation as part of his greater "Protecting Our Children" campaign pledge. Senator John McCain (R-Arizona) proposed a universal ratings system for all media—including videogames—all the way back in 1999. And, of course, there's Senator Hillary Clinton (D-New York), who not only coauthored the Family Entertainment Protection Act but also publicly called for Federal Trade Commission investigations into the Hot Coffee mod scandal of 2005.

Could violent videogames become the next hot-button issue for swing voters, just as gay marriage was in 2004? It's possible, especially if the issue gets swept into the greater public debate about the media's influence on "family values."

In fact, it may have already begun. In the July 2007 YouTube presidential debates, several voters submitted video questions on candidates' stances on videogame legislation. And a December 2007 survey from Hill & Knowlton found that 60 percent of Americans—including 55 percent of active gamers—would be in favor of the government regulating the sale of violent or mature videogames.

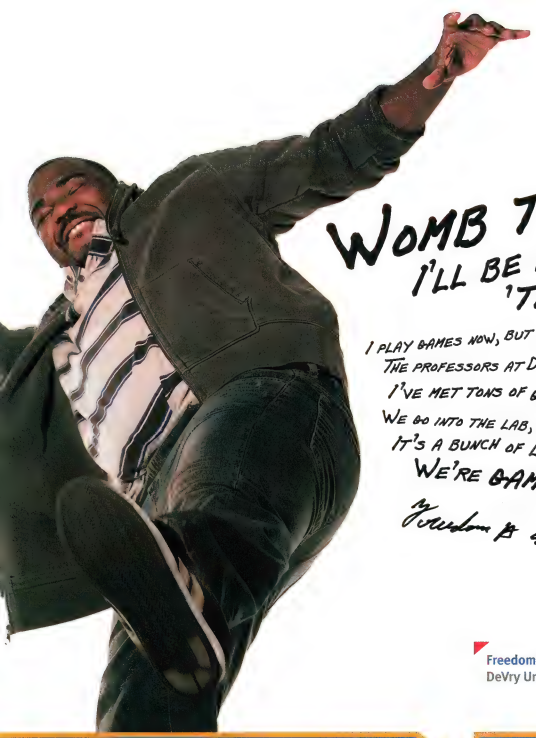
That's why, Halpin says, we need to encourage gamers to get active in the voting process. "Enough with letting antigames activists be the only voice in the room, and enough with [politicians] using us to advance their agenda," he says. "It's time to bring the pain and get aggressive, get proactive."

If antigaming legislation is political posturing on our dime, he says, then we should start asking for our money back.

"I'd love to see our members show up with the local media in tow at the initial hearings, putting a face on who 'gamers' actually are," Halpin says. "That face being [politicians'] own constituents, their voters. That would be really impactful."

Lara Crigger

LAWMAKERS ARE VERY RARELY HELD ACCOUNTABLE FOR WASTING MONEY ON THESE LEGISLATIVE SNIPE HUNTS.



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THE FREELOADER PRESENTS

FREE PLAY

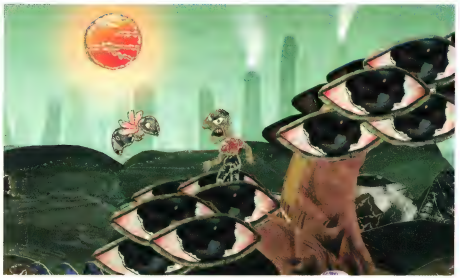
The best games that money can't buy

COLUMN

The Freeloader

Know about some sweet free games? Tip off our resident freeloader at freeloader@1UP.com is the best way to reach him.

You've probably heard the story by now: Valve's surprise-hit puzzle game *Portal* began life as a little project called *Narbacular Drop*, designed and developed by a handful of game-design students at DigiPen Institute of Technology. The lesson learned: If you want to see the future of gaming, turn an eye toward the schools. So in honor of *Portal*, *Narbacular Drop*, and the spirit of forward thinking, I turn my gaze this month to the 10th Annual Independent Games Festival (www.igf.com) and the finalists in its 2008 Student Showcase—12 student projects that caught the festival's eye. Some of them are available for download to the public now. Try them for yourself, and who knows—you might be playing gaming's "Next Big Thing" right now.• The Freeloader



FLIPSIDE

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XTRAS

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File-Front

The students of Denmark's National Academy of Digital, Interactive Art clearly play a lot of Nintendo games. This *Half-Life 2* mod's concept takes a note from the likes of *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* and *Metroid Prime 2: Echoes*, offering a "light side" and "dark side" of its mad, mad world. (Main character Hannibal starts the game by escaping from an insane asylum, you see.) The art direction takes a page from *Paper Mario*—every cloud and tree is made from corrugated cardboard, and every character is jointed like a paper marionette.

Gameplay is pure platformer, but the light/dark worlds present a twist: In light, Hannibal can double- and triple-jump to gain additional height. In dark, he loses his free-spirited athleticism but gains the ability to head-butt enemies and climb special walls. Certain points in the game require you to chain these moves midleap (triple-jump in light world to gain enough height to reach a climbable wall in dark)—extra challenging because left becomes right in the transition, and extra frustrating because *Flipside*'s floaty, imprecise leaping controls are easily its biggest weakness.

Flipside's fun is short-lived, but it's worth it just to see the art in motion. The transition from light world to dark world is splendid—the camera swings around dramatically, showing you the cardboard cutouts from the opposite side, as trees become stalks of eyeballs, and happy hopping rabbits become evil nurses straight out of some refrigerator-door drawing of *Silent Hill*.

CREATOR'S CORNER

Empyrical Nocturne, originally profiled in Free Play in GFW #5 (pg. 43), is one of the 12 IGF Student Showcase finalists. Coconuters Chad Taylor and Reed Sorensen talk shop.

GFW: We dig the "flock of birds" around your bird god that you use as a sort of omni-resource for your different moves. How did you arrive at that gameplay mechanic?

RG: The idea of sacrifice for the greater good lent itself well [to] different game mechanics, such as attacking or defending. Health and boost were a natural extension of that.

GFW: Why darkens the sky to indicate low health instead of using a health bar?

CT: We wanted a minimalistic interface that was unobtrusive. We had a health bar up until the day before we completed the final version.

GFW: Any earlier ideas that you threw out?

CT: One was to have an avatar with many tails that you could use to bless the monsters' limbs to remove them. We realized that it would turn the controls into a nightmare so we scrapped it.

RG: The working title was also originally *God Bird* but we thought that it had too much of a religious connotation and didn't want to help anybody the wrong way.

CT: Plus, *God Bird* rhymed with "dog turd."

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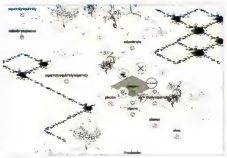
FILE UNDER: **SimLanguage** URL: **http://poesysteme.free.fr**

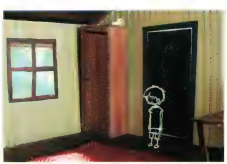


If you can't parse the title, think "poem" plus "ecosystem," and remember that this game comes from students in France—and that its own creators call it pretentious. *Poesysteme* is *The Sims* with words, *Viva Piñata* with syllables. It's a game where you design a rudimentary world (drop down grass, trees, and ugly muck in an isometric grid) and unleash words into it—represented by little smiley faces—to love, learn, reproduce, and change. As there are no goals or game per se, your satisfaction comes from watching the simulation and trying to determine what affects what: Why did "mop" combine with "corn" to make "mopcorn"? What environmental conditions made "happy" so sad? Did "existence" just pick a fight with "oblivion"? Why did "banana" become "bananabanabanabanana" when I wasn't looking? Maybe there is no "why." Oh wait, there it is, hanging out over by the tree with "syzygy." I think they're in love.

RÜCKBLENDE (FLASHBACK)

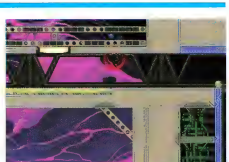
FILE UNDER: **Handcrafted fairy tale** URL: **www.indygamer.blogspot.com/2007/12/new-rckblende-mirror.html**

Less a game than an interactive short story, the wordless *Rückblende* asks, "What happened here?" "Something disturbing," I reckon. Set in a dreary wooded area (and the one-room cottage within) resembling a folksy papercraft project to an eerily evocative score, you play an unnamed character whose curiosity about certain objects in his environment triggers sketchbook flashbacks to his childhood: two stick-figure adults (presumably your parents) leaving the cottage, apparently content; a windowsill spiderweb and the secret it revealed; a falling flashlight and the subsequent adventure it inspired. Interaction resembles *Myst*: Click an arrow to move left, right, forward, or down, and a movie plays out. While the scope is obviously limited, *Rückblende* offers a lot within its limited time and means. It'll spark your imagination, to be sure.



POLARITY

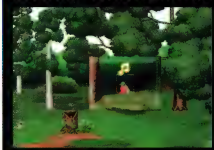
FILE UNDER: **Opposites Attract**
URL: **www.etc.cmu.edu/projects/igf**



Games play with gravity all the time—from *Super Mario Galaxy* to *Prey*—so beg your pardon if the concept of "up becomes down" doesn't faze me. You'd be pardoned, too, if you dismissed *Polarity* at first glance. The conceit: Change the color of your suit on the fly (red to blue, blue to red) and you'll stick to the opposite-colored surface. But as you progress through the game (its four levels will take you 30 minutes, tops), the game plays with magnetism in surprising ways. Wear a blue suit near a blue surface and you'll repel instead of attract, making hovering possible. Wear red near a blue ball and it'll roll toward you. Switch to the same color and it'll rebound away—and it works through walls, too, leading to all sorts of platforming and object-manipulation puzzles that I haven't quite seen before.

INDIE PICK OF THE MONTH

It's not free—but it's close enough!



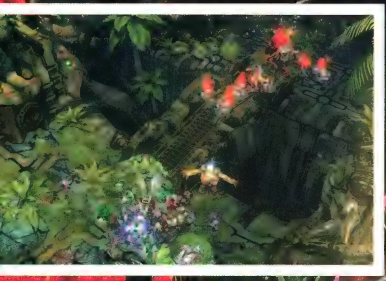
Snapshot Adventures: Secret of Bird Island

PRICE: **$19.95**
DEVELOPER/PUBLISHER: **Large Animal Games**
URL: **www.largeanimal.com/games/deluxe/snapshot-adventures-secret-of-bird-island**

Just how long have I been clamoring for a decent bird-watching game? Oh, that's right. But *Snapshot Adventures: The Secret of Bird Island*, my Indie Pick of the Month, makes a good case for it with a simple premise that takes about five seconds to learn but remains oddly compelling hours later, thanks to a nice difficulty progression and reward system.

The game is simple: You're charged with taking decent photos of birds in increasingly challenging (though never actually difficult) circumstances, all while solving the mystery of your missing grandfather, a famous bird photographer. *Snapshot Adventures*, from New York–based Large Animal Games, is a finalist at this year's Independent Games Festival in the category of Design Innovation (check www.igf.com in late February to see who won), but I'm not sure if it's the design here that's innovative as much as it is the subject matter. Plenty of other games have had us scouring environments for animals, though the goal has usually been, of course, to shoot them. And 1999's *Pokémon Snap* for the Nintendo 64 explored the idea of photography-based gameplay, with players striving to take perfect pictures of Squirtles and Bulbasaurs.

Still, the developers have a good thing going here. You may scoff at it in the first couple of minutes, especially after your first glance at the somewhat cheesy graphics, but when you're hunched over your PC later that night, desperately trying to get a decent photo of a flying Summer Tanager, you'll appreciate the way the game changes up, challenges you, and gives you new gear to play with. And no one's going to accuse you of being a violent gamer with this one. Though a rocket launcher *would* be kind of fun.



WORLDSHIFT'S CO-OP DUNGEON CRAWLS ARE BEST COMPARED TO MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER RAIDS.

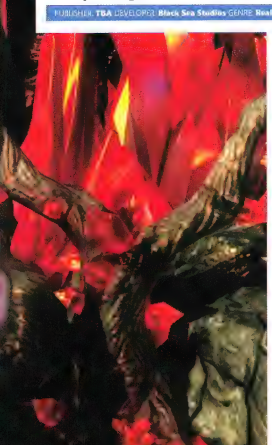
• Cooperative dungeon crawling yields loot useful for competitive play...

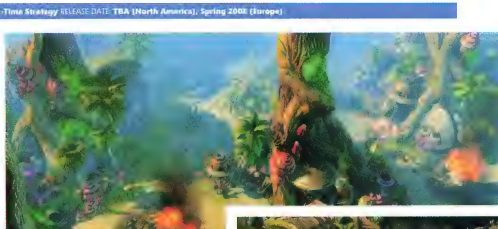
• ...but Black Sea Studios insists superior tactics beat even the best equipment.

WORLDSHIFT

Co-op dungeons, loot drops—wait, isn't this a strategy game?

PUBLISHER: **TBA** DEVELOPER: **Black Sea Studios** GENRE: **Real-Time Strategy** RELEASE DATE: **TBA (North America), Spring 2008 (Europe)**





• **Unit upgrades persist across multiple matches. How this affects game balance is anybody's guess.**

PREVIEW

"We're doing something different," is easy enough to say, but with real-time strategy—a genre with more than a decade of history and countless evolutions—virtually impossible to implement. So, when *WorldShift* lead designer Vesselin Handjiev says that developer Black Sea Studios intends to offer something other than the same old, I'm skeptical at first.

While the proof will be in the final product, *WorldShift* does propose some pretty clever turns on the tried-and-true by borrowing from familiar, if unexpected, inspiration. "We have special player-versus-environment features, [as well as] an ability grid that allows players to modify and tweak the three factions included in the game," Handjiev says, "and the modifications you make are all persistent." In place of resource gathering and base building, loot drops, skill trees, and multiplayer raid environments become part of the game's surprising lexicon—conventions more often associated with *WarCraft* when it has "*World of*" in front.

But where *WorldShift*'s play concepts break new ground, its fundamental structure may be disappointingly familiar. The RTS' three factions arrive in different flavors: humans who lay claim to the last bastions of civilization, a shamanistic group of expelled mutant-humans known as the Tribes, and the omnipresent alien invaders known as the Cult, a master race of ghostlike humanoids and a slave race of genetically modified servants. This trinity vies for control of a futuristic Earth that has endured thousands of years of strife and turmoil, leaving humanity on the brink of extinction and the Cult poised to destroy the world to achieve galactic domination. Stop me if you feel like you've heard this before.

WorldShift's more intriguing ideas are born from its cooperative dungeon crawls, best compared to massively multiplayer raids. Handjiev describes these as fairly typical dungeons with "mobs and bosses" designed for a team of three players, each with a particular role to play. "Someone needs to take the damage, someone will need to heal, and someone will need to kill," says Handjiev. Team up, kill the boss, get the loot, rinse and repeat to deck out your faction with equipment.

TO GRIND OR NOT TO GRIND

Loot appears to be the unifying reward for play that ties the game together by allowing players to take the equipment they earn in solo or co-op play and employ it to destructive advantage in traditional player-versus-player skirmishes. Much as an MMO player might gain an advantage by having raid-earned equipment, *WorldShift* players who have earned the best equipment from the single-player campaign and co-op dungeons have an advantage over an underequipped opponent.

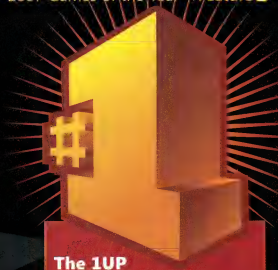
It's an interesting idea, though it does demand commitment from the player. Handjiev confirms that all but one co-op dungeon will be initially locked, which means that you'll have to go through the campaign just to open the dungeons in which you'll grind for relics. "A player who is fully equipped with relics will have a huge advantage over one with nothing," says Handjiev, "and I think that's the way it has to be." And while he acknowledges that some elements of *WorldShift* earn valid comparison to an MMO, he maintains that this is still fundamentally a strategy game, and that superior tactics will beat even the best equipment.

On a deeper conceptual level, offering skill trees and equipable loot complicates game- and faction-balance issues, a point which Black Sea concedes, but is confident it can overcome. "Indeed, it makes it harder," says Handjiev, "but we have a thorough RTS background as both developers and players." And once the game launches, Black Sea will be watching the community closely for balance issues. Or, as Handjiev reassures, *"WorldShift* will be an evolving game, not a release-and-forget title."

While cross-genre experiments for RTS games have yielded some success in the past, particularly with games like *Sacrifice* and *Battlezone*, which blended first-person shooter elements into an RTS framework, the challenge for Black Sea is to address the specter of grinding for drops and complicated faction-balance issues. • **Sean Sands**

We're not sure if 2007 was the best year in the history of PC gaming, but it was certainly one of the most challenging. And we mean that in a *good* way. *BioShock* asked us to face our definition of "freedom." *Crysis* did, too, proving that smart designers can push a game's bounds further than we imagined. *Sam & Max* made us think that maybe there's something to the word "episodic" after all, while the brilliant, bargain-priced *The Orange Box* bundle made us realize that we were all much, much stupider than the people who work at Valve. Over the next several pages, you'll find our choices for the most significant PC games, ideas, moments, and trends of 2007—beginning with a countdown of *GFW*'s top 10 games of the year. **The editors of *GFW***

GFW'S 2007 PC GAMES OF THE YEAR



The 1UP Network Awards

Our Top 10 of 2007 culminates in the official unveiling of the **1UP Network Editors' Choice Awards** for PC gaming on pg. 52—*GFW*'s selections for PC Game of the Year, Best Multiplayer Experience, Best Narrative, Person of the Year, and more...think of it as gaming's Academy Awards. The 1UP Network, in case you were wondering, is the collective name we give to *Games for Windows: The Official Magazine*, our consolecentric sister publication *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, and videogame site 1UP.com. We present the PC winners here, but you can pick up the March 2008 issue of *EGM* to find out which console games owned 2007. Or head to 1UPawards.1UP.com for continuing video coverage—and to learn which games readers like you chose as the best of 2007.

07 MES THE YEAR

The games and gambits that shaped 2007

10 THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE: SHADOWS OF ANGMAR

How to use a license

It was a long, hard road—like the one from Hobbiton to Mordor—for those involved in getting this game out the door. For 10 years this massively multiplayer RPG set in J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy world struggled as it went from one developer and publisher to the next, just another piece of vaporware that most of us frankly thought would never see the light of day.

But when, at long last, *LOTRO* finally shipped in April 2007, the big surprise was not that it came out, but just how good it turned out to be. Turbine Entertainment, rebounding dramatically from the disappointing *Dungeons & Dragons Online*, delivered a rich, polished, and utterly accessible MMO—the most successful, design-wise, since *World of WarCraft*. Yes, that is partially because *LOTRO* borrows from *WOW*, but Turbine puts enough of its own spin on things to escape claims of "rip-off." More important, however, is the way Turbine utterly nails the look and feel of Middle-earth (especially the Shire) and smartly incorporates Tolkien's narrative into the player experience, making you feel, more than ever seemed possible, like you are part of the *Lord of the Rings* storyline—a pretty cool trick for a MMO, where plots generally tend to fall by the wayside.

LOTRO may not be very innovative, but it is the best new MMO of 2007, easily, and proves, for once, that a licensed property doesn't necessarily spell death or failure for an online game. It's true, friends: Frodo lives!

Jeff Green

9 PEGGLE

Enemy of the productive

You could argue that this is nothing but digital pachinko. You could argue that it takes no skill. That's OK. We forgive you. We were once like you. But once you start playing, you will discover the truth: You can't *stop* playing. And that's OK, too. Let yourself go. Be one of us. Be a *Peggle* zombie. There is no shame in it. PopCap Games, the maker of *Bejeweled* and *Bookworm*, did it again in 2007 with another insidiously addictive puzzle game, and no one expects you to resist.

On the surface, *Peggle* looks like the easiest—and possibly dumbest—game ever. Click the mouse (the game's only control) to fire a ball into a screen full of colored pegs. Knock out all the orange pegs to advance to the next level. Repeat. The game's look is frighteningly cute—equal parts Teletubbies and psilocybin nightmare—which only adds to the somewhat nagging embarrassment you may feel while playing.

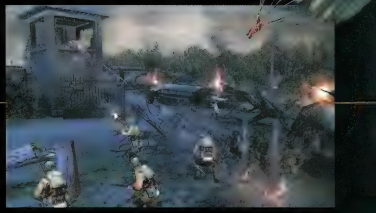
But as with all the best puzzle games, *Peggle* only *looks* easy. It sucks you in with the simplicity of its concept, but as you get deeper into it, it wears you down until it owns you. What seemed like utter brainlessness now becomes careful deliberation, with shot planning and angling and strategic use of power-ups.

OK, so it's not *Civ IV*—it's an equal-opportunity time waster. This magazine ground to a halt numerous times over *Peggle*. So don't be a snob. Let it ruin your life too! **Jeff Green**

TRENDS 2007's seismic shifts

SOCIAL REVOLUTION

If you have an Xbox 360, you have Xbox Live—Microsoft's one-stop shop for every single community activity on the console. On the PC, however, decades of open-network activity have splintered its community into countless shards: GameSpy, Xfire, Ventrilo, TeamSpeak, Comrade—to say nothing of where Facebook or MySpace fit into gamers' social lives. As much as we love freedom, all those icons in our system tray make us long for Xbox Live's simplicity and single, unified Friends list. Microsoft recognized that and gave us Games for Windows Live, wonderful in theory but disappointingly flawed in execution. More successful is Valve's Steam Community, and not simply because it's free. But even that's still not perfect, and penetration isn't even close to 100 percent. We'll get there someday.

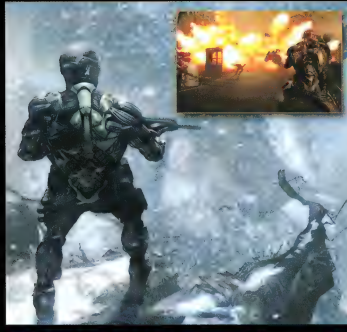


COMPANY OF HEROES: OPPOSING FRONTS

In for the duration

8 **Tally its features** and *Company of Heroes: Opposing Fronts* fares well: two entirely new armies, a full-fledged offline campaign for each, DX10 graphic upgrades to an engine already two years ahead of its time, and the power to play online against owners of the original game even if you and only you purchased the "expand-alone."

It takes longer to assess *Opposing Fronts*' true achievement—and reviews written without the hindsight of hours and hours of online warring reflect this. You learn the game's great versatility little by little (often through losing), and by the time you begin to appreciate how utterly unlike either of the earlier armies both the new Brits and Panzer Elite are, you're already an addict—jonesing to convince naysayers that *Company of Heroes*' cover and concealment options, ebbing and flowing attack-and-retreat tactics, and unit veterancy rules combine to create an RTS without rival. Where *COH* claimed that title a year ago, *Opposing Fronts* cements its prestige and replayability, making Relic's masterwork as fun, fresh, and unforgettable as it was when it won multiple game of the year awards in 2006, while selling us on future expand-alones set in World War II's Eastern Front and Mediterranean and Pacific theaters if the developer ever gets the go-ahead to deliver them. ● **Shawn Elliott**



CRYSIS

Opportunity cost

7 ***Crysis*' accomplishments** are enormous—enough to make up for stick figure characters who can't carry the first-person shooter's sci-fi plot and a failed final act that ignores and abuses everything good in the hours before it. That's not a backhanded compliment; it's testament to the power and importance of the feats *Crysis* does pull off. One of these only *seems* superficial: No game with pretensions to photo-realism approaches *Crysis*' technological leap. The fidelity of its environments (encompassing volcanic valleys and shimmering blue bays, shorebirds, and sea turtles) enhance their interactivity. For eight or so hours, you are there, gliding through marshes; leaping headlong over cliffs to elude pursuing helicopters; sprinting, swimming, driving, and boating by turns.

Crysis' developers are confident in our abilities to both get where they want us to go, whichever way we choose to get there, and creatively use the tools they give us: claymore mines, firearms, and a supersuit with speed, armor, camouflage, and strength settings. Where other shooters insist we click the obtrusively flashing icon on every tank ("press F to plant C4!"), *Crysis* tempts us to try something else. So we cycle to nanosuit strength, snatch up the C4, and see if we can throw it at armor 50 yards away. Select the detonator, and what do you know? It works. **Shawn Elliott**

HIGH TECH, LOW PRIORITY?

When we saw the sad, scarily slow sales numbers for *Crysis*—which by all accounts should have been one of PC gaming's biggest blockbusters, if only for the "oh, wow" factor—we were all a bit stunned. Blame piracy if you want, but the more reasonable answer lies in all the "looks great, but I doubt my PC can run that" message-board posts leading up to the game's release. Crytek CEO Cevat Yerli admits to making *Crysis* future-proof (and intimates its full potential won't be realized until folks have machines from a few years in the future)—but a plan like that backfires if nobody puts a copy into storage in the first place. On another front, Windows Vista continues to be near the bottom of PC gamers' gotta-get-it lists, since DirectX 10 has yet to prove itself essential—or, given some games' performance-to-payoff ratio, even preferable.

SAM & MAX: SEASON ONE

Glorious resurrection

A lot of developers bandy the term "episodic gaming" about without really understanding its implications with regard to realistic release timetables. Ritual Entertainment's *SiN Episodes: Emergence* and Valve Software's *Half-Life 2: Episode One* both dropped on Steam in the middle of 2006; a corporate buyout scuttled Ritual's *SiN* series (with a second episode previously scheduled for 2006's holiday season) while the latter finally received a follow-up after an agonizing 16 months. Compare and contrast these epic, time-consuming projects with Telltale Games' own episodic series of *Sam & Max* adventure games—whose inaugural six-part season ran from October 2006 to April 2007.

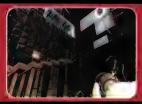
The roughly one-game-a-month schedule didn't shovel gamers a series of messy rush jobs, either; the long-awaited return of cartoonist Steve Purcell's cult 1980s comic-book characters (sadly absent from the gaming scene since 1993's *Sam & Max Hit the Road*, thanks to multiple aborted sequel attempts) gave fans exactly what they'd dreamed of for over a decade. The dog-and-bunny detective duo's oddball situations, cartoon-logic puzzles, and comic timing are expertly resurrected by Purcell and designers Dave Grossman (*Day of the Tentacle*) and Brendan Q. Ferguson, whose insane plots send Sam and Max from the White House to the moon itself as they foil a sextet of interlinked mind-control schemes.

And while *Season One* gives us the return of Sam and Max—and an episodic series that actually hews to the meaning of the word "episodic"—its biggest success lies in its value to the genre: This is arguably *the* best point-and-click adventure game since 1998's *Grim Fandango*, and it definitely tugs hard at the Sierra/LucasArts nostalgia strings. Sam and Max prove that adventure games aren't dead...they just lack some serious quality control that—when present—props them up as resolute as ever next to PC gaming's holy shooter/strategy/role-playing trinity. ● **Ryan Scott**

TRENDS 2007's seismic shifts

A MATTER OF TIME

Plenty of jaded critics and everyday gamers love to slag shorter games—and frankly, we don't understand it. Not every game needs to be an epic *Baldur's Gate*-length marathon, as several of 2007's best releases ably demonstrate. Taking from our own top 10 list, each of *Sam & Max*'s bite-sized episodes provide a regular fun diversion and always leave you eager for the next, while *Portal*'s three-hour tour tells exactly the story it needs to. The fact that such short games walk away with some of our top spots cements what's always been obvious to the writers in us: Concise prose often equals better prose.



WORLD OF WARCRAFT: THE BURNING CRUSADE

Second life

If sheer number of hours played is the sole indicator of a game's value, then *World of WarCraft* would be No. 1 on our list once more, just as it was back in 2005. MMORPGs are notorious timesinks, sure, but in *Burning Crusade*'s case, quality justifies that quantity. This is quite simply the finest expansion for an MMORPG ever produced.

For long-haul players, Outland essentially invalidates the original's Azeroth with smarter quests, more interesting spells (as a level 70 Priest, I can't imagine life without Binding Heal or Prayer of Mending anymore), exotic locales—and fast-flying mounts to make getting from point A to B a joy instead of a nuisance.

Ask players what keeps them hooked still (*Burning Crusade* was released in January 2007), and you'll hear a wide variety of answers: For soloists, its hundreds of streamlined quests mean you're never lacking for something to do; for PVPers, arena combat offers a competitive outlet against one of the largest player bases in the world; for others, rolling and rerolling alts with a handful of friends does the trick. For me, it's the brilliant raid game, the smartest and most seductive cooperative multiplayer experience I've ever had—nothing compares to the collaborative puzzle-solving of a Magtheridon fight or a trip through Karazhan, brilliantly wrought encounters that reveal designers at the top of their game. (If you need to prove it to yourself, do what I did recently and head back to Molten Core with a half-dozen nostalgic members of your guild, just to refresh your memory. You can't go home again.) And Blizzard's constantly evolving, if not reinventing—the *Burning Crusade* we're playing today isn't the same as the one that hooked us back in January 2007. (These days, Zul'Aman and daily quests—content added months after *BC*'s release—occupy most of my time.)

Sure, there are things we'd change. Concepts like mote farming and reputation grinding can be a barrier and a bore, and the commitment level required to see the best stuff is still daunting. But even those that burn out and move on more often than not append their goodbyes with "But just for now. I'll be back for *Lich King*, no doubt." • **Sean Molloy**

MMO STATUS QUO

What do *The Lord of the Rings: Shadows of Angmar*, *Richard Garriott's Tabula Rasa*, and *Vanguard: Saga of Heroes* have in common? None of them managed to dethrone *World of WarCraft* as the world's favorite MMO this year.

For all its posturing and positing that it would change the way MMOs were played, *Tabula Rasa* proves to be just like all the others: quests and grinding, only with a slick sci-fi skin (odd that Garriott's game turns out to be closer to *WOW* than *UO*) instead of orcs and elves. *Vanguard* tried to take things back to the way *EverQuest* used to be (i.e., "for the hardcore"), but that game's spectacular failure has prompted changes to make it—well, more like *WOW*. Turbine's *The Lord of the Rings Online* is the most successful of the bunch—by, not surprisingly, being the most *WOW*-like (part of that definition is "polished") of the bunch.

BIOSHOCK

Rapture in Rapture

4 People are fond of saying hindsight is 20/20. But in the case of 2K Boston's *BioShock*, hindsight is really just...confusing. Consider the setup: It's a first-person shooter set in an underwater city built on the principles of Ayn Rand's objectivism; vending machines dispense gene-therapy tonics that let you shoot fireballs at Dick Tracy villains...but watch out for the guy in the diving suit with the drill for an arm! Who would predict a multimillion-copy-seller from that description?

But prior to its release, pundits pegged it as world-changing, the usual hyperbole ("it will change the way you think about games," "unlike anything we've ever seen," that sort of thing) stretched to extents that had even the most cynical buying it wholesale. Upon its release, 10 out of 10s flew freely (this reviewer included) and five-star reviews fell from the sky—critics in some major outlets even went so far as to declare it game of the year before the year was even complete. These days, the signal gets lost in the noise of *BioShock* backlash, and it's hard to find a message board without threads entitled "*BioShock*: Most Overrated Game Ever?" where posters recall derivative fetch quests, an out-of-place final boss battle, an oversimple harvesting gimmick, a weak third act, too-easy combat, and unsatisfying endings. But what does one make of such recollections when they're made by someone on his third playthrough?

So what is *BioShock*, then, really? If it's the sum of its parts, then we'll enumerate the great ones: "Is a man not entitled to the sweat of his brow?" asks Andrew Ryan as you descend into Rapture for the first time. You enter Fort Frolic, where Sander Cohen turns an arcade of adult amusements into a showcase for his mad, murderous art. You find an audio diary where a brainwashed woman kills a puppy at the uttering of a code phrase—and then you realize you've been dancing to the same tune. Two freakish lovers waltz as the world falls down—you wonder how long they've been there, and ready your telekinesis as you contemplate whether they deserve to die. You hear the deep moan of a Big Daddy for the first time, immediately juxtaposed with the squeal of a little demon girl calling a decaying body an "angel." You free some Little Sisters from their curse—and then receive your first teddy bear as a gift. You fight a Big Daddy, panic as a second lumbers in from the next room—and then grin devilishly as you pit them against one another with an Enrage plasmid. That *BioShock* is merely No. 4 on our list speaks more for the three games that topped it than for itself. **Sean Molloy**

TRENDS 2007's seismic shifts

IT'S OK TO BE SMART

Gamers fear the nongamers: This is an age where the Wii proves that "grandma gaming" sells a zillion consoles, and publishers lament how hard it is to turn a profit on a *Crysis* or an *Unreal Tournament 3*. So sing a song for *BioShock*, Ken Levine's brilliant blockbuster based on, of all things, philosophies embedded in the pages of *Atlas Shrugged*—it proves that taking a chance on an oddball concept doesn't necessarily spell financial disaster, which is good news for folks who fear a world composed solely of sudoku puzzles and party minigames. Nordiness prevailed for Valve's *The Orange Box*, too, from the harder-edged sci-fi *Half-Life 2: Episode Two* to the mad, singing operating systems and science comedy of *Portal*.

HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE 2

Valvolution

3 Shooters in 2007 saw *BioShock* and *Crysis*, *Quake Wars* and *Call of Duty 4*—among such shiny new toys, it's easy to take a new episode of *Half-Life 2* for granted. (The original is, what, 3 years old? That's ancient history as game time goes.) Valve's ongoing saga is first-person comfort food: Alyx and the gravity gun are peas and carrots; the Source engine and a dying Strider's elephant call are warm apple pie with ice cream on top. Except that momma's been tweaking her recipes—and you're just starting to realize that all this time, you've just been the subject of her mad culinary experiments.

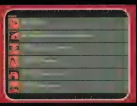
There are smart folks at Valve Software—smart enough to know that they should never stop learning, either from themselves or from their audience. We praised them for the original *HL2*'s unparalleled sense of pacing, but *Episode Two* moves even more effortlessly from vehicular physics puzzles to Antlion-den raids to free-form Strider-busting battles and says, "Eh, well, yeah, but it turns out *this* is really what it was supposed to be." Oh, maybe you're right...I guess Nova Prospekt did go on a little too long.

That's to say nothing of the science fiction: We (rightly) praise *BioShock* for playing it smarter than most games' grade-school stabs at Tolkien and Asimov, but the oppressive Orwellian visage of Dr. Breen graced the TV sets of City 17 long before Andrew Ryan ruled Rapture. While we roll our eyes at other games' prerelease assertion that this, dear player, is the first of a trilogy (make us care about the first one before you even bring up a second, please), *Half-Life 2: Episode Two* finds the same sort of narrative hooks as a good episode of *Lost*: important changes, mysteries within mysteries, and characters believable—personable—enough to make you curse Gordon Freeman's lack of a tongue.

Just tell her you like her, dammit. ■ **Sean Molloy**

ACHIEVEMENTS COME TO PC

We always laughed at those crazy console kids and their Xbox Live Achievement points...but secretly, in the backs of our minds, we just wanted in on the action ourselves. And you can bet we were among the first to start obsessively collecting Achievements when they finally started showing up last year in various GFW Live– and Steam-powered PC games. It's hard to put a finger on why these completely trivial and often offbeat accomplishments—like, say, falling 30,000 feet in *Portal*, or annoying your teammates with Tree of Life spam in *Shadowrun* to earn your "Healer" badge—bring such satisfaction, but here's hoping they stick.



TEAM FORTRESS 2

Cartoon logic

2 It's one of those rare games that makes the constant delays seem so *very* worth it in the end: Originally announced in 1998, the sequel to *Quake* team-shooter mod *Team Fortress* weathered numerous visual styles and outright developmental reboots as the nitpicky folks at Valve Software struggled to settle on *just* the right design. The final version of *Team Fortress 2* sports a clever, stylized guise, starring a set of crazy characters that look like they just walked out of *The Incredibles*—a perfect complement to the game's absurd red-versus-blue throwdowns, and a decision that the series' loyal fans near-unanimously embraced.

What's more, Valve achieved mass appeal by striving for straightforwardness, trading *TF1*'s hardcore disposition for a much more basic and inclusive gameplay approach. Match-dominating frag grenades disappear in the name of balance, and the nine iconic *Team Fortress* classes are split into offensive, defensive, and support roles, each serving a sharply defined team function, and each brandishing its own trio of weapons.

TF2's simplicity certainly pays off. Whether your style revolves around subtlety (out-of-nowhere Snipers and Spies), team support (the one-man wrecking crew that is the Engineer, and those handy Medics that so few people seem to play), or simple mass destruction (trusty Soldiers and perpetually overpowered Pyros), something's here for everyone—even the greenest of green FPS players (this humble writer included). The game's detailed stat-tracking (broken down by class and covering everything from time played to objectives captured to highest lifetime point totals) and incorporation of Xbox Live-style achievements provide all the incentive one needs to capture flags and camp control points for hours on end.

That *TF2* ships with a mere half-dozen maps underscores its staying power; the game's odd detractors cite the environmental sparseness as a glaring weakness, though this couldn't be further from the truth. Six maps, yes—but six *really* good maps. The average *TF2* server cycles through the scenarios at a decent clip, ensuring as little boredom as possible by flip-flopping teams into offensive/defensive positions with each match. Valve has more maps coming, but as it stands, *TF2* provides enough variety in the maps and classes to ensure that things rarely get repetitive.

In a year littered with hardcore team-based shooters (*Unreal Tournament 3* and *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* foremost among them), *Team Fortress 2*'s all-inclusive simplicity stands out in stunning form. If this is what nine years of development does to a game, then by all means, developers—bring on the delays. ● **Ryan Scott**

TRENDS 2007's seismic shifts

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Savvy gamers demand complexity, but a few games last year prove that sometimes it's best just to scale it back a bit. The game above is one such famous case, both in form and in function. Designs dating back nearly a decade revealed what a Valve *Battlefield* could have been. Today's *TF2* eschews vehicles and kits for simple classes—you are what you are, like it or not—and removed some concepts from the original game entirely. Ken Levine admits *BioShock*'s Plasmids were once rife with resistances and percentage points akin to those in RPGs but that 2K Boston eventually settled on simplicity instead of stats. If it's wet, shock it. If it's icy, melt it. It would have been easy to decry such decisions as heralds of hardcore gaming's demise—but with results like these, who can argue?

How We Decided

You can't really apply science to something as subjective as "best games of the year"—but we tried anyway. To sort out our top 10 PC games of 2007, each *GFW* editor compiled a personal list of his 10 favorites (presented here); we assigned point values to each position, and simple math dictated the rest. (Advice from our regular contributors sorted out ties.) A similar poll decided the 1UP Network Awards on the next pages (Best Narrative, Biggest Innovation, and so forth); then we locked ourselves into a room until we achieved consensus.

5 Games That Made Us Wish We Did a Top 15

S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: SHADOW OF CHERNOBYL
Shooter design from an alternate universe.

CALL OF DUTY 4: MODERN WARFARE
The campaign's scripted, yeah, but scripted *well*.

THE WITCHER
A morally murky, mature RPG with a smart story.

PUZZLE QUEST
Bejeweled: The RPG? Read why it works on pg. 72.

ARMAGEDDON EMPIRES
Sci-fi *Magic: The Gathering* on a hex grid.

JEFF GREEN,
Editor-in-Chief

1) Portal
2) World of WarCraft: The Burning Crusade
3) Half-Life 2: Episode Two
4) Team Fortress 2
5) Sam & Max: Season One
6) Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer
7) Call of Duty 4
8) BioShock
9) The Lord of the Rings Online
10) Peggle

SEAN MOLLOY,
Managing Editor

1) World of WarCraft: The Burning Crusade
2) BioShock
3) Portal
4) Half-Life 2: Episode Two
5) Team Fortress 2
6) Sam & Max: Season One
7) Galactic Civilizations II: Dark Avatar
8) Crysis
9) Armageddon Empires
10) The Witcher

DARREN GLADSTONE,
Senior Editor

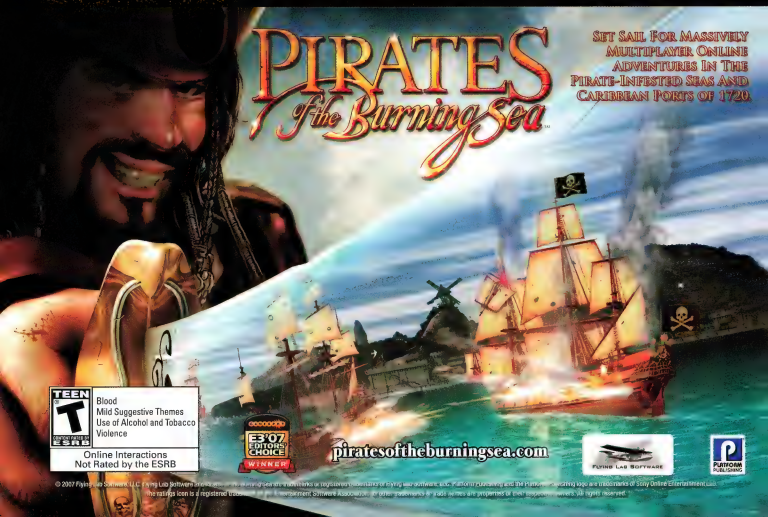
1) Portal
2) BioShock
3) Half-Life 2: Episode Two
4) Crysis
5) Team Fortress 2
6) Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars
7) World in Conflict
8) Sam & Max: Season One
9) Peggle
10) Overlord

RYAN SCOTT,
Reviews Editor

1) Team Fortress 2
2) Portal
3) World of WarCraft: The Burning Crusade
4) Puzzle Quest
5) Sam & Max: Season One
6) The Lord of the Rings Online
7) Peggle
8) World in Conflict
9) SimCity: Societies
10) Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved

SHAWN ELLIOTT,
Start Editor

1) Company of Heroes: Opposing Fronts
2) BioShock
3) Half-Life 2: Episode Two
4) Portal
5) Team Fortress 2
6) Crysis
7) S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl
8) Peggle
9) Enemy Territory: Quake Wars
10) Call of Duty 4


PIRATES of the Burning Sea
Set Sail For Massively Multiplayer Online Adventures In The Pirate-Infested Seas And Caribbean Ports of 1720.
T
Blood
Mild Suggestive Themes
Use of Alcohol and Tobacco
Violence
Online Interactions Not Rated by the ESRB
E3'07 EDITORS' CHOICE WINNER
piratesoftheburningsea.com
Flying Lab Software
Playfirm Publishing
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GAME OF THE YEAR
PORTAL

2007 1UP Network Awards

We've counted down our editors' picks for nine of the 10 best PC games of '07—now it's time to unveil *Games for Windows: The Official Magazine*'s Game of the Year winner and the rest of the 1UP Network Editors' Choice Awards for PC gaming excellence.

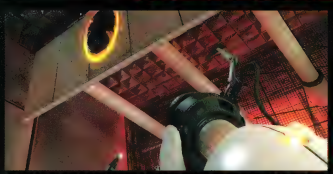
The presentation of the PC awards listed here is set for February 20 in San Francisco, alongside console Editors' Choice Award winners from *Electronic Gaming Monthly* and 1UP Award winners (voted on by 1UP.com readers). For more, including a list of all the winners following the ceremony, visit 1UPawards.1UP.com or GFW.1UP.com. Don't agree? Write gfwletters@ziffdavis.com.

EDITORS' CHOICE WINNER 2007 1UP NETWORK AWARDS

If this comes as a surprise, then you weren't paying attention in 2007. In a phenomenally strong year for gaming, in which any of the games on the preceding pages could claim this spot, *Portal* is in a category all its own. More than just our Game of the Year, *Portal* is also *the* phenomenon of 2007, uniting gamers across all genre preferences and platforms. It's an astonishing triumph for such a "small" game, something we'd initially pegged as a freebie Valve was just tossing into *The Orange Box* with *Half-Life 2: Episode Two* and *Team Fortress 2*.

But *Portal*, upon release, unexpectedly and instantaneously ignited like wildfire across the gaming landscape, becoming the one game you had to play immediately, that you could not wait to show or talk about with other people. And when you did play it yourself, you discovered that the hype was real. Clever, original, challenging, inspired, and laugh-out-loud funny right down to the brilliant closing credits, *Portal* may be as close as a game has come in years to being "perfect."

It sneaks up on you. At first, you feel like you're just playing a very cool puzzle game. Which, of course, it is. You play as a test subject charged with making your way out of a series of increasingly complex chambers armed only with only one thing: a gun that shoots interspacial portals onto two surfaces and then lets you travel between them. It's one trick, one innovation, but it allows for endless variation as you keep discovering new ways to travel, incorporating velocity and momentum. But just at the point where the puzzles might start getting old, *Portal* switches into overdrive and reveals itself as an action game—a great one—in which everything you've learned now comes into play against the year's best villain, the taunting, chiding GLaDOS.



Valve long ago proved they were masters of gaming narrative. *Portal* is their short story and demonstrates, as the best short stories do, that quality has nothing to do with length. Last year's Game of the Year, *Oblivion*, could absorb you for 100 hours. *Portal* lasts about 97 hours less—and tells an even more absorbing tale. The cake may have been a lie, but *Portal* is the real deal—the icing on an awesome year of gaming. ● **Jeff Green**

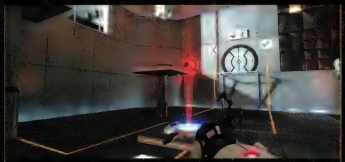
TRENDS 2007's seismic shifts

ENVIRONMENT AS CHARACTER

2007 found game designers using their levels to speak as much as their characters—quite literally in the case of *Portal*'s pervasive malevolence, GLaDOS, and more figuratively in *BioShock*'s tragic figure of Rapture (its scattered audio diaries tell the city's tale more than the individuals' stories). *Team Fortress 2*'s distinctive red and blue bases attribute lifestyles to what were previously just colors, while in *Crysis*, the jungle environment has more personality and life than any of the bipedal or space-squid organisms. Landscapes in *The Elder Scrolls IV: Shivering Isles* share personality traits with their patron gods. Even *Sam & Max: Season One* manages to turn what could have been merely "recycled assets" (recurring locations in every episode) into familiar, funny faces.

1UP NETWORK AWARDS

Editors' Choice winners for excellence in PC gaming



BEST NARRATIVE

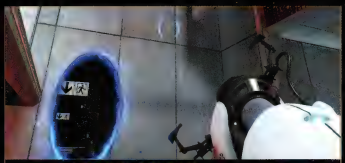
PORTAL

The year's best narrative fools you into thinking that there is no narrative—but it soon reveals itself, and you quickly realize all is not as it seems as an increasingly malevolent supervisor puts you through an inexplicable string of tests while stringing you along with strange and often hilarious promises. The writing's so strong that it made a memorable character out of a six-sided inanimate object. We still mourn its loss.

BEST MULTIPLAYER EXPERIENCE

TEAM FORTRESS 2

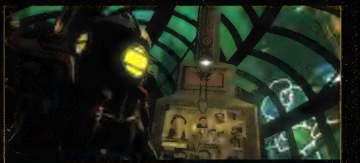
Considering that, at this point, you need to be some sort of genetically enhanced mutant cyborg in order to stand a chance at complex team-based shooters like *Counter-Strike* and *Quake III: Arena*, *Team Fortress 2*'s stark simplicity is a boon. Anyone can jump in, pick a class that suits their style, and play an important role on the team—and have a ton of fun doing it.



BIGGEST INNOVATION

PORTAL

Or maybe we should say innovations. The obvious one: Aperture Science's nifty space-displacing portal gun (the potential in a full-on shooter is staggering). The less obvious—but more important—one: *Portal*'s duration, or lack thereof. Sometimes less is more, and greatness can be achieved in three hours flat (without an ounce of fat).



BEST AUDIO DESIGN

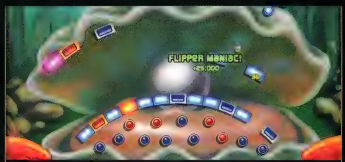
BIOSHOCK

The soundscape in Rapture is as lush as the architecture: cascading water and cackling, crazed Splicers singing strange, scary hymns. Bobby Darin ballads provide the counterpoint to crackling audio diaries of panicked mothers. A Big Daddy moans, triggering panic attacks and setting off your scanner. Where's a gas canister or puddle of water when you need it?

BEST ARTISTIC DIRECTION

TEAM FORTRESS 2

There was no shortage of candidates for this award—*Crysis* and *BioShock* being obvious contenders—but in the end we chose *Team Fortress 2* because every single aspect of the design—from the character animations to the weapons to the look of the levels—is so crucial to the game's success, perfectly complementing, even defining, the gameplay. The cartoony new look may have shocked us at first, but within two minutes of play it's clear that it was a brilliant decision on Valve's part, giving the game a vibrancy and accessibility and lightness rarely seen in a shooter.



CASUAL GAME OF THE YEAR

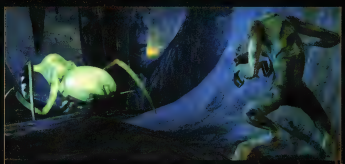
PEGGLE

What else is there to say about *Peggle* at this point? How much can one magazine write about a game that has one mouse-click as its entire interface? The fact is, you've probably already overplayed this as much as we did in 2007 and know why it's getting this award. If you didn't, go download it now and we'll see you back in 2009 after you've wasted the year like we did. PopCaps been in the winner's circle before with *Bookworm* and *Bejeweled*. With *Peggle*, they prove they're still the kings, and as much as we hate them for it, we hope they never stop.

OVERLOOKED GEM

S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: SHADOW OF CHERNOBYL

Similar to some made-in-America shooters from an age before "everyone" became a target audience, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* assumes you're smart. Its Ukrainian developers are confident in the clues they leave and the underlying logic of the world they've created from Chernobyl's radioactive ruins. As a result, you go where you're going, do what you're doing, and even though you aren't always able to say why or how, you end up where you need to be. If that doesn't sound fun, you haven't visited a far off, foreign country with nothing but an outdated guide book and five words from the local language.



BEST LEVEL DESIGN

HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE TWO

It's a little eerie, really, how intimately Valve seems to understand your train of thought. While some games rely on flashing arrows and color-coded doors to guide players to their destination, *Half-Life 2: Episode Two* relies on intuitive human knowledge—gravity and physics, a door ajar, a bit of rubble out of place, or suspicious scorch marks on the surroundings. Valve also knows the breadth of your attention span: Even more so than previous installments, *Episode Two*'s wildly varied set pieces know exactly when to call it quits and move on to defy your next expectations.

PERSON OF THE YEAR

KEN LEVINE

2K Boston creative director and *BioShock* creator Ken Levine reached market saturation in 2007. He made gamers add Ayn Rand books to their Amazon Wishlists, caught mainstream media attention not for violence in a videogame but for its artistic merit, and proved that, well, sometimes your crazy vision is so crazy it just might work. We catch up with him to get his take on PC gaming in 2008.

GFW: 2007 was a great year for games. But what's on your buy list for the next 12 months?

Ken Levine: I have a feeling that the games industry has done this insane tap dance, and now the industry is just [*gasps for breath*]. Because, honestly, the release list for this year is not nearly as strong as the release list last year. My hope is that there are going to be a bunch of weird little gems. Little games can really grab hold of me.

GFW: Is that part of the PC universe—surprising, small projects?

KL: There's no control of the distribution. So I'll go to GoGamer.com and come across things I wouldn't come across normally—things like *Sacred*. I was just looking at some turn-based space strategy game from some Russian developer. They won't even be out in the States, but you can import them. There are lots of downloadable games coming out that I'm just dying for—[like Stardock's] *Sins of a Solar Empire*.

But one of the problems you have on the PC is that the big releases—$4 to $5 million games like Irrational's *Tribes* or *SWAT*—are just going away, because there's not a clear market position for them. It opens up this opportunity, that with totally free-market digital distribution, crazy s*** is going to get out there. Have you ever heard of a game called *Mount&Blade*?

GFW: Haven't heard of it...

KL: It's a weird medieval RPG. There's no final version; you just pay for [the beta] to help them support their development. It's got some really, really cool stuff. I paid my fee a couple of years ago, and it's not even out yet.

GFW: Like *Dwarf Fortress*.

KL: Exactly. It's a perfect example of that kind of stuff. There's a free-market Wild West on the PC that just can't exist on the console.

GFW: Do you think this kind of farm-team system—the kind that brought us *Portal*—is going to stay a PC thing?

KL: Well, there's Marketplace on [Xbox] Live, and PlayStation Network, and I guess Nintendo has a solution coming, too. But the problem is you always have The Man at some point saying yes or no. There are some restrictions, and you certainly can't do a model like *Mount&Blade*, where you get an excited fan base to pay you to develop your game. And you can't really do expandable content the same way. *Magic: The Gathering Online* is the perfect example, where you have a relatively small installed base, but those people are spending thousands of dollars a year on cards, potentially.

Any businessperson would look at *Dwarf Fortress* and say, "What, are you f***ing kidding me?" But an audience is not going to feel the same way. I can't imagine a more niche product. But man, does it service those people in that niche.

GFW: Oh yeah, we just gave you our Person of the Year award—not the first accolade you've received recently.

KL: Person of the Year....wow, what do you say to that? That's sort of too cool to even process. My mom always said either I was going to be rich and successful or living on the street. I'm not sure this is going to convince her, but it's a good start. ●

BATTLEFIEL

Everybody's war

BY SHAWN ELLIOTT

LD HEROES

COVER STORY

Commercially, *Crysis* crashed and burned—let out a long whistle that plummets as you go. Selling 86,633 units in the States as of December 2007, the sales seemed catastrophic to some commentators who, as they have every year, declared PC gaming dead. *Unreal Tournament 3*'s figures from the same holiday sales period were just as dismal at 33,995, but developer Epic Games had hedged its bet with PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 ports. *Crysis*, on the other hand, has no such safety net. Unless it comes to consoles, it'll live or die on the devotion or indifference of an audience committed to computer gaming, which, so far, has balked at the first-person shooter's expensive-hardware entry barrier, or swiped the software from illicit file-sharing sites. While those who cry doomsday will do what they do, they're right in that budget-devouring development can't flatline forever. Undoubtedly, publishers and studios will read the writing on the wall in different ways—although almost all of them will declare PC-only, graphics-processing powerhouses a done deal for the foreseeable future. Ubisoft answered by announcing it would build *Far Cry 2*, which it originally trumpeted as a top-tier PC game, for current-gen consoles as well. With its next *Battlefield*, Swedish developer DICE has another idea altogether: challenge the very assumptions about what constitutes a proper PC game. *Heroes* not only promises to work well on laptops and lower-end boxes—*it's free to play*.

Run with it: According to DICE, *Heroes* ought to run on a rig with specs as low as 1GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 64MB video card, and 500MB free hard drive space.

HEADS UP

Abilities equipped before battle appear on the bottom of the screen. Some, such as the Soldier's "heroic" perception, incendiary rounds, and health boost (which buffs all allies in the area), recharge over time. In addition to these power-ups, cartoon Tommies and Fritzes can stock up on assorted taunts and emotes. Instead of calling up *Battlefield 2*'s quick-command rose, pressing the Q key opens six panels, each corresponding to a selectable jeer, wisecrack, or bit of suggestive body language. Like abilities, you buy these with points earned through play. "Maybe it's me liking *Habbo Hotel* and similar social spaces," senior producer Ben Cousins says, "but I'm interested in the idea of hanging out and goofing around."

Senior producer Ben Cousins' eyes opened in South Korea, a country so gaming obsessed that the rest of the world can only wonder whether its culture offers a window into a global future or just a glimpse at a peculiar parallel dimension. "One of our contacts out in Korea believes that there's a hardcore gamer in everybody," he says. "What they do is work to drop the entry barriers, to give everyone the opportunity to discover the gamer within them. And then, hey, who can complain that they don't like what they didn't pay for?" Pointing to network television programs, I argue that people, in fact, complain about entertainment that they aren't paying *cash* for, all the time. The crucial difference is that when the only payment is to put your eyes on advertisements, it's easier to set skepticism aside and decide for yourself. When a game like Seoul-based Nexon Corporation's *MapleStory* comes free of charge *and* operates on the kind of lower-end PCs that most households have, you can see how a mere mention on a message board could induce gamers to Alt-Tab over and try the title out. Later they return, tell all, and then, if the word is good, the player base balloons. "We're in a world where everyone's online, where everyone is used to accessible, free services and products, whether it's Facebook or MySpace," Cousins says. "We're getting high-quality content gratis. *Heroes* taps into that habit, and we love the idea that

The "National Army": Nazis by another name.

EASTERN FRONT

"We're sitting in a Seoul Internet cafe playing *Special Forces* or *Sudden Attack*—big first-person shooters there—and at 4:30 [p.m.], when the schools close, droves and droves of 14-year-old boys in blazers come in and sit down," senior producer Ben Cousins says. "You get this sense that these guys aren't being serviced properly in the West."

we no longer have to persuade people to step into stores or upgrade their PCs. Look into it on a whim. Maybe you'll love it. Maybe you won't. It's liberating for us, all the same."

In lockstep with its reduction of tech restrictions, DICE is tuning a friendlier, less frustrating *Battlefield*. "First-time players go into *Battlefield*, and bang, they're dead," lead designer James Salt says. "Then they wait 15 long seconds before spawning back in again."

"Lately, in a lot of these ultrarealistic games, if you get two bullets in a guy, he's dead," Cousins adds.

"[In *Heroes*] you have much more health," Salt says, "the weapons are less immediately lethal, the spawn time is shorter, and firefights last longer—if you shoot somebody, they realize it and react, maybe run around a corner, and take cover. Then you come around that corner and finish the fight, rather than having ended it in a split-second encounter."

"And you have time to use unlockable abilities," adds Cousins. "Like, I've got an incendiary bullets ability. I fire at you, you put out the flames with another ability—different tactics that don't >

No laying down on the job: To keep "dolphin diving" from deciding battles, DICE has done away with *Battlefield*'s prone ability. Although you can crouch to take cover, you won't shoot any straighter.

totally depend upon precise aim and professional [shooting] skills."

CONVERGENT EVOLUTION

Whether or not you want to see *Heroes*' all-inclusive design as a "dumbing down"—an assumption many readers will make the moment they pair the word "free" with the cartoony screenshots in this story—*Battlefield* has always been larger than life, about exploding jeeps and jettisoned planes. "Incredibly over-the-top, crazy cool," as Cousins puts it. He also argues that, rather than ripping off *Team Fortress 2*, *Heroes*' planning phase ran parallel to Valve Software's work on that team-based shooter. "The original idea to do a cartoon *Battlefield* dates back to the *Battlefield 1942* days, when creative director Lars Gustavsson envisioned a game along these lines," he says. "We definitely had our style down before Valve unveiled *TF2*...but [that game's] popularity has been encouraging because we were concerned that stylized stuff would put off our core audience." Call it convergent evolution: studios independently arriving at similar solutions to related problems. Just as *Team Fortress* was always the shooter with outfits of oddball warriors using rocket launchers to leap between opposing bases built a few feet from one another, *Battlefield* was once the war game where Mustang wings ferried Joes to and from so-called capture points. Says Cousins: "We want to refresh that classic *Battlefield* feeling. We want to bring back wingwalking. We love the goofball videos that guys [record in our games and] post on YouTube."

The comparison works in other ways, too: Where Valve simplified *Team Fortress*, removing features rather than adding more, DICE is addressing long-standing *Battlefield* faults by scaling back. As a longtime fan of the franchise, Cousins, who previously contributed to Sony's PlayStation Home networked community, says, "It's been fun coming here and heading up the project, trying to solve all of these problems that have been bugging *Battlefield* followers for five years. This is why you spawn within five seconds. I hated staring at the sky as the clock ticked; it drove me crazy. And waiting for vehicles to spawn sucked. The new system ensures that a vehicle appears when you arrive at its spawn point."

Because long hauls into enemy territory that end in flames before you've even fired back piss him off, *Heroes* has smaller maps than *BF2*. And the old bugbear of public-server players being everywhere but the one location they ought to be attacking or defending? *Heroes*' "intelligent spawn system" automatically places players as close to the action as possible. While the first-timers who DICE is determined to coddle won't have to fuss with confusing map-based spawn-selection menus, friends accustomed to fighting together in fireteams could find their tactics and ability to coordinate compromised. The *Call of Duty* series demonstrates yet another trade-off inherent to enforced frontline spawning: It's fairly simple to fish for free kills, saturating areas with explosives where you suspect opposition forces will appear. *Battlefield* is no stranger to spawn camping, as it's called, but before, you could temporarily forfeit contested territory by choosing to respawn in the security of your own base. Don't think that these are nonissues in a play-for-free shooter intended to lure dabblers; DICE is encouraging persistent play for lone wolves and competitive clans alike.

FIGHT TO THE DEATH

Ditching classic *Battlefield Conquest*, *Heroes* uses a team deathmatch mode. "Each side starts with a set number of lives, and every time you frag someone, their team loses a life," senior producer Ben Cousins says. "Capturing control points increases the total number of lives you take for every kill."

POINTS ARE THE POINT

Salt's still not sure what to call one of *Heroes*' standout features (presumably publisher EA's copywriters will coin something catchy). "At the moment, I'll call it the metagame. Imagine a map—players fight for territorial possession of Europe or some series of countries. You align yourself with one faction, and then as you play, your points go into that army's pool. At the end of the week, we tally the total number of areas that each faction owns and then award each player 'money' according to the percentage of occupied territory. I love the idea that clans will form alliances and bargain with one another over which faction they'll fight for. 'Join us this week

Air inferiority: Lead designer James Salt says, "Planes are slow-moving, and all weapons will deal some damage to them."

"WE HAD OUR STYLE DOWN BEFORE VALVE UNVEILED *TF2*."

–BEN COUSINS, SENIOR PRODUCER

and help us conquer this country.'" He compares it to the tabletop classic *Risk*, what with its unsteady coalitions and shifting strategies, only in *Heroes* the campaign never ends and "money" is the ultimate motivation, not world conquest.

"Money" buys prestige, or at least what passes for it in a videogame that caricatures the Third Reich (Cousins, a Brit, says that *Heroes*' other faction borrows from Britain's World War II military, and it does. But I also know American battle rattle when I see it). Characters are wholly customizable; in-game cash gets you eye patches, badges, hats, boots, helmets, goggles, belts, gloves—on and on it goes, heads, faces, necks, chests, hands, waists, legs, and feet, all shelves for your marching/goose-stepping trophy case. "We're keen on the idea that if you line up several versions of the same character class, they'll all look very different," Cousins says. "We want the community to debate about the coolest characters you can make at level 50 or whatever."

Cousins insists on maintaining a meritocracy—skills, not bills, unlock loot—but is interested in leveling the field for older and/or employed players. "I want to emphasize that 95 percent of the people who play *Heroes* will never spend a penny. However, we will sell some items," he says. "It's tempting to think, 'Oh, they're selling items, so somebody will buy the big bazooka and blow everyone else away. Now if you look at the Asian model, the things that sell well are actually called convenience items. Let's say that James [Salt] here plays *Heroes* a lot and is quickly leveling up his character, whereas I'm working evenings and can't compete. One of the items that they sell in Korean free-to-play games—and this is >

Shopping for new guns has never been so easy: Simply kill, kill, kill.

something that we'll probably try, too—increases the speed with which you accumulate experience points. What we absolutely won't allow is for people to purchase powerful characters and weapons. You'll never have to pay to compete."

SUPER HEROES

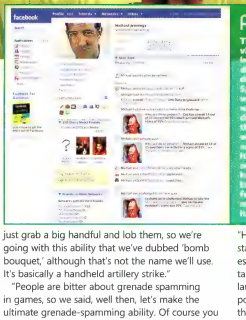
Battlefield Heroes' booty doesn't end at doll dresses. Weapons and abilities—familiar to *Call of Duty 4* players who call them perks—make more than a skin-deep difference; they let you look through walls and throw flaming lead. When it launches, *Heroes* will have three character classes. You choose one when you create an account and, unlike other *Battlefield* games, cannot switch kits mid-match. Instead, you outfit yourself with abilities before beginning a game.

Says Salt: "We're basing these abilities on the archetypes we've chosen for each class. Say you're a Soldier. He's the all-round hero and excels at determining the enemy's location. Look at war movies where a guy walks into a building full of Germans and somehow guesses that there's a guy around the corner—we like that. So when you trigger this see-the-enemy power, it outlines nearby opponents, even through walls. This lasts, say, 10 seconds, and then you have to wait through a 30-second cycle for it to recharge." Unrealistic and loving it, he's able to implement ideas that wouldn't otherwise work in a title more than remotely indebted to historic duels. "I've always wanted to throw 15 grenades at a time, just grab a big handful and lob them, so we're going with this ability that we've dubbed 'bomb bouquet,' although that's not the name we'll use. It's basically a handheld artillery strike."

"People are bitter about grenade spamming in games, so we said, well then, let's make the ultimate grenade-spamming ability. Of course you can only use it now and then," Cousins says and smiles. "If I were to say we'll have 15 abilities at launch, we're likely looking at 50 in the first year."

In a Goldilocks' take on game balance, *Heroes*' Soldier is the medium-sized momma bear. The Commando, who specializes in stealth, stab kills, and sniping, fits in baby's bed, so to speak. According to Cousins, "He has fewer hit points, is fast-moving, and slips in and out of cover. He can partially cloak and his weapons do high damage, but he doesn't have much ammo."

The Gunner (that would be poppa bear) "is basically well armed and well armored," Salt says. "He's a little slow, though. Like the tough guy left standing at the end of the fight, there's nothing especially subtle about him. He's the man-tank." Wielding rapid-fire machine guns, rocket launchers, and perhaps flamethrowers at some point in the future, Gunners are able to grab and throw back grenades. Whatever else they'll do remains on the dry-erase board. *Battlefield Heroes* is a work in progress that DICE will tweak and develop long after an official launch date.



PROPAGANDA WAR

The ads that appear on the walls of Heroes' villas and on the sides of its tanks are interactive. For instance, one banner might display a set of eyebrows and ask you to determine whether you're looking at Britney Spears, Jack Nicholson, or Frida Kahlo. That was a joke. You'll see no promotional material while playing, period. Rather, EA intends to draw advertising revenue by renting space on the game's Login and Community webpages when the game's public beta phase begins this summer. Lead designer James Salt says to see it as a social hub, and we just have a some screenshots, a video, and that's it. We have to have content that keeps you coming—friends lists, an item store, character customization, forums, community news, leaderboards, and more." Imagine a Battlefield-based MySpace; it isn't far from the mark.

YOUR WAY

Salt and Cousins come alive at the idea of the extended deadline, implicit in a game that's never done. Every decision is flexible, up for debate. If the opinions of producer, designer, or anyone involved in the project don't prevail today, popular consensus could make them possible tomorrow.

"We have a much bigger and more involved community management team than we've ever

had for a *Battlefield* game before," Cousins says. "They'll poll people and check the forums to see what players want, plus we have cool telemetry technology that lets us look at the type of items people are picking, the sorts of characters they're setting up... I love the idea that the audience will define what we're about. If *Heroes* is a game about growing the biggest mustache in the world on created characters, that's great. Or is it about being the best, most skilled and strategic clan in the community? Maybe people will want user-created content, and then that will take off. It's really liberating to run an online service rather than just selling a box through the shops and then crossing our fingers."

Once again, Valve's *Team Fortress 2*, which shipped with six maps and three modes, is archetypal. Why spend months making 15 maps, as DICE did with *BF2*, only to find out that most players stick to the immensely popular Strike at Karkand? Rather, the lesson is to release early and often. In theory, the game's protean populism will keep customers coming back—to see what surprises each subsequent autopatch holds, and, as DICE sees it, to put their eyes on the very advertising that pays for the venture.

The possibilities are promising. An ever-growing garage of vehicles is almost inevitable as are new armies and character classes. Cousins nods in agreement when I suggest applying personal touches to the tanks, jeeps, and planes already in the game: "Yep, you jump in, hear a spray-can sound, and then shark's teeth appear. Little aerials and flamethrower attachments."

We mull over everything from aircraft missions such as *1942*'s Coral Sea and Battle of Britain maps to holiday-themed content common in MMORPGs. He'll hear any suggestion. And reassuringly, he's a fan of *Battlefield*'s best expansion, *Secret Weapons of World War II*.

"We can go there and much further," he says. "One influence on our art style is the *Metal Slug* series, the side-scrolling shooter with oddball helicopters and boss battles against massive tanks made of a million turrets. We can drop a biplane or a Model T Ford into the game if we want. In fact, putting in horses would probably work...actually, our animators would kill me if they catch me saying that."

DIFFERING POINTS OF VIEW

Already, *Battlefield Heroes*' animators have one less task to worry about: Because the entire game is played via third-person perspective, there's no need to create duplicate animations that hold up under the close scrutiny of a first-person camera. I'm as incredulous when I hear this as I know any diehard *Battlefield* fan will be when they read it. Dealbreaker. Following jeeps with a chase cam is one thing, but firefights and dogfighting? Dedicated FPS players lose the immediacy and immersion, feel that everything is detached and toy-like. Third-person POV is an accordion in *Battlefield*'s rock band. Lame.

Cousins' defense is as follows: "First, you want to see this cool dude that you've created and how far you've gotten with the guy. Then, first-person perspective is off-putting for people who aren't familiar with shooters. It's tough for them to see where they are in the world and difficult for them to walk through doorways. But there's another side to it. Seeing yourself onscreen, getting blown into the air and such—that's immersive, too. And emoting in first-person is almost impossible [see sidebar]. That drove our decision as well." As with anything about *Battlefield Heroes*, however, even camera control is negotiable: "If the community really, really wants first-person play, we can change it."

Offering both points of view would, of course, consume DICE's time and budget, and for the time being cake *and* eating isn't an option. *Heroes* shoots for the mass market, and depending upon your interpretation of *Crysis*' and *UT3*'s abysmal sales, you can't always count on PC FPS aficionados alone to recover considerable development and marketing costs. Still, those of us in the so-called hardcore fringe are inevitably the game's vanguard, and our voices are likely to be the loudest on Internet forums, where word travels fast. Then again, we might agree with Salt, who insists he was as skeptical as anyone until he actually sat down and tried it. After all, it is free.

Reviews

Opinions you can trust

Sam and Max in the Episode Triangle in the second episode of Sam & Max: Season Two.

THIS MONTH IN REVIEWS...

Those of you who subscribe to our sister magazine *Electronic Gaming Monthly* no doubt read editorial director Dan Hsu's controversy-courting editorial (*EGM* #225, February 2008), in which he calls out certain game publishers—namely Ubisoft, Sony's sports division, and Midway's *Mortal Kombat* team—for blacklisting *EGM* and the rest of the 1UP Network (*GFW* included) from media events, timely review mailings, and other coverage. For folks who don't know the story, these bans stem from publisher dissatisfaction regarding our frank reviews and critical previews. And, in a way, it tells me that we as a group are doing something right: We don't pull punches when it comes to serving our readers, even if that means rattling a few cages by way of our brutal honesty.

Obviously, *Mortal Kombat* and the Sony sports brands don't mean much of anything to PC gamers or *GFW*, but you'll undoubtedly notice fewer (and later) articles on Ubisoft's games in the foreseeable future. Just rest assured that when we review off-the-shelf Ubisoft games (and we *will* continue to review them), they'll receive the same fair, critical treatment as everyone else's games—no more, no less. ●**Ryan Scott, Reviews Editor**

UGH

Juiced 2: Import Nights

Street racing at its most grippingly average.

67

WOW

Armageddon Empires

One of 2007's best turn-based war games.

68

OMFG

Puzzle Quest

It's an RPG...strategy... puzzle game. And it's *totally rad*.

72

SCORE KEY

Editors' Choice award

EDITORS' CHOICE

Computer Gaming World for Windows

9-10: Excellent

7-8.9: Good

5-6.9: Average

3-4.9: Bad

0-2.9: Terrible

MEET THE CREW

REVIEW CREW 1UP NETWORK

The Review Crew is the 1UP Network's ensemble cast of game critics from all of our print and online publications. We believe that games are more than the sum of their parts, so we tackle them subjectively, as *experiences*.

JEFF GREEN
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Having vowed to beat reviews editor Ryan Scott in a race to level 70 in *World of WarCraft*, Jeff gained *one* whole freakin' level over the 2007 holiday break. He lost the race. Horribly.
Current Faves: *World of WarCraft: The Burning Crusade*
1UP.com Blog: GFW.1UP.com/Jeff

RYAN SCOTT
REVIEWS EDITOR
After a months-long *WOW* binge, Ryan finally decided to shelve it in favor of a few other games out there. Since then, he's developed a renewed interest in *Team Fortress 2* and a fairly obsessive *Puzzle Quest* addiction.
Current Faves: *Puzzle Quest*, *Team Fortress 2*
1UP.com Blog: GFW.1UP.com/Ryan

SEAN MOLLOY
MANAGING EDITOR
Since *World of WarCraft* has already seen ample discussion in Jeff and Ryan's bios up above, Sean will spare you the details of his fruitless efforts to defeat *WOW* raid boss Morogrim Tidewalker.
Current Faves: *World of WarCraft: The Burning Crusade*
1UP.com Blog: GFW.1UP.com/Sean

SHAWN ELLIOTT
START EDITOR
Shawn, echoing concerns put forth by many of GFW's loyal readers, is really fed up with the fact that we seem to mention *World of WarCraft* in approximately every other sentence.
Current Faves: *Team Fortress 2*, *Company of Heroes*
1UP.com Blog: GFW.1UP.com/Shawn

BRUCE GERYK
STAFF REVIEWER
In between important doctor-related business, skipping out on this month's Tom vs. Bruce, and not playing *World of WarCraft* (which he doesn't even play anyway), Bruce made time to review the amazing *Armageddon Empires*.
Current Faves: *Armageddon Empires*
1UP.com Blog: grogsnards.1UP.com

GORD GOBLE
STAFF REVIEWER
Gord doesn't know *World of WarCraft*, but he definitely knows racing games. And he sure wishes developers did a better job including racing wheel support for 'em. Thankfully, he's still got *GTR2* and *Race 07*.
Current Faves: *GTR2*
1UP.com Blog: gordhollo.1UP.com

1UP NETWORK

Head to ReviewCrew.1UP.com to meet all of the 1UP Network's expert reviewers.

From left: Amelia Earhart, D.B. Cooper, and the Lindbergh baby.

SAM & MAX: EPISODE 2X02—MOAI BETTER BLUES

So this dog and this rabbit walk into the Bermuda Triangle...

PUBLISHER: Telltale Games/GameTap DEVELOPER: Telltale Games GENRE: Adventure AVAILABILITY: E-tail (www.telltalegames.com or www.gametap.com) ESRB RATING: Teen
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.5GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 274MB hard drive space MULTIPLAYER: None VERSION REVIEWED: Near-Final Retrievable

REVIEW

Deep within the Bermuda Triangle, a diaper-wearing baby version of Glenn Miller sips tropical drinks and searches for a hip new sound for his next big single, to be distributed via conch shell for the locals...who happen to be giant, depressed stone Easter Island heads. I'm not sure if that's funny, but it sure is *odd*—a running theme in *Moai Better Blues*, the eighth episode of Telltale Games' *Sam & Max* adventure serial. I've loved a few of these *Sam & Max* episodes to death (*Abe Lincoln Must Die!* and season two starter *Ice Station Santa* in particular), but *Moai*'s sense of humor made me say "Huh?" as much as "Ha!"

D. B. COOPER, EH?

The setup is, of course, completely silly: Former queen of Canada Sybil is being chased by a triangular interdimensional portal, which leads to Easter Island, which is inhabited by a trio of talking stone heads (each imbued with different elemental powers) and three Sea Monkeys with three tasks for the detective duo. As with most *Sam & Max* episodes, three is the magic number—and in one joke, the game openly admits its Kabbalistic obsession (though lead designer Dave Grossman says it has less to do with comedy's "rule of three" and more to do with manageable puzzle structure).

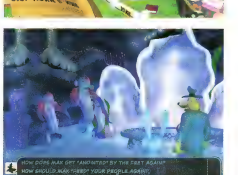
The oddest thing is the seeming number of narrative dead ends. Cast regular Jimmy Two-Teeth sets up a new home...but nothing really comes of it. At one point, convenience-store-owner-turned-conspiracy-nut Bosco simply vanishes (though *Moai*'s ending—stay past the credits—suggests a later episode may explain this). The baby versions of Amelia Earhart, D. B. Cooper (yeah, I had to Wikipedia him, too), and the Lindbergh baby (yes, the baby version of a baby) act as mere set decoration, which would be fine if they were funny...but as with baby Glenn Miller, I mostly found their presence odd. While a few dialogue exchanges are laugh-out-loud funny (this is *Sam & Max*, after all) and a few moments are certain to make series fans grin ear-to-ear, *Moai* settles too often on mere weirdness as its punchline. And *Moai*'s story—symptomatic of second episodes, I suppose—doesn't really do much to clue you into the season's overall plot.

> MOAI'S SENSE OF HUMOR MADE ME SAY "HUH?" AS MUCH AS "HA!"

TRIANGULATION

While the writing's miss ratio is a bit higher than most past episodes, the puzzles are some of the smartest in the series yet. Unlike *Santa*—which had a couple head-scratchers that left me thinking Telltale may have taken "*Season One* was too easy!" criticisms a bit *too* seriously—*Moai* has a near-perfect rhythm of perplexity and "aha!" (I never once had to resort to the series' new built-in hint system). Cartoon logic rules, and I'm always impressed when incidental artifacts from previous episodes act as central puzzle pieces later.

But even a *Sam & Max* misstep isn't a stumble, and Telltale still practices the lost art of adventure games with aplomb. This is a series to treasure, even if *Moai* feels like it belongs in a "Lost Episodes" compilation—somewhere in the Bermuda Triangle, no doubt. ● **Sean Molloy**



HOW DOES MAX GET "ANIMATED" BY THE FART AGAIN?
HOW SHOULD MAX "HERD" YOUR FAQULA AGAIN?
HOW SHOULD MAX'S "FALSE FACE" APPEAR AGAIN?
SIGH!"

● ***Moai* could've done without this surfing minigame. Hint: Use the keyboard, not the mouse.**

VERDICT

- **Puzzles are better and smarter than usual.**
- **Not quite as hilarious as usual.**

7/10

GOOD

Games for Windows

THE HISTORY CHANNEL: BATTLE FOR THE PACIFIC

The way it wasn't

PUBLISHER: **Activision** DEVELOPER: **Coldrum** GENRE: **First-Person Shooter** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Teen**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2.5GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 3.3GB hard drive space, 256MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2-12 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

REVIEW

Yep, the History Channel showed that TV is a better teacher than books. History Channel videogames? As instructional tools go, they're even greater yet. In fact, the second I figure out Fraps (a real-time video capture utility), Stephen Ambrose is out of business. (Note that if the retiree chooses to lend his approval and authority to my recording, I'm totally cool with *Stephen Ambrose Presents Shawn Elliott Playing The History Channel: Battle for the Pacific*. Of course, he *could* play it himself—however, I will warn that pausing to search for the crouch and/or sprint key is not historically accurate.)

Look at what I learned: While figurative bands of brothers fought in WWII's European Theater of Operations, eight to 10 literally identical twins took Guadalcanal, the Philippines, and Iwo Jima from Imperial Japan. Japanese forces were just as indistinguishable, and these historical facts are not to be confused with ethnocentric assumptions about Asians all looking alike or the possibility that *Battle for the Pacific*'s production budget allowed for the creation of only two character models.

Though they outnumbered American GIs 1,000-to-one, Hirohito's boys blew their numerical advantage with thoughtless tactics and a near total inability to shoot straight. In contrast to the Japanese infantryman's dogged determination to expose himself to enemy fire while on the way to the precise patch of dirt where dozens of his countrymen just died, his Yankee counterpart had to remain within 20 yards of his commanding officer at all times. In fact, this rule is so hard and fast that you drop dead the same second you disobey and, say, wander 21 yards away. Which is to say that this is history as it happened; now if only the game were fun. ●**Shawn Elliott**

EIGHT TO 10 LITERALLY IDENTICAL TWINS TOOK GUADALCANAL, THE PHILIPPINES AND IWO JIMA

●**The History Channel: always striving for 100 percent accuracy.**

VERDICT

- **Nobody's making you buy it.**
- **Boring, below-average first-person shooting.**

3/10
BAD
Games for Windows

JUICED 2: HOT IMPORT NIGHTS

Ambitious yet insulting

PUBLISHER: **THQ** DEVELOPER: **Juice Games** GENRE: **Racing** AVAILABILITY: **E-tail (www.steampowered.com)** ESRB RATING: **Teen**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **3GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 6GB hard drive space, 256MB videocard (gamepad recommended)** MULTIPLAYER: **2-8 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Final E-tail**

REVIEW

Juiced 2 **is the Vegas of racing games.** Coated in a veneer of epilepsy-inducing light shows, skanked-up Sin City–style models, and a gaudy pseudo-TV presentation, it's slicker than the Strip. Sporting a bevy of racing modes and off-track activities, a cornucopia of muscle cars, and a remarkably comprehensive performance and visual modification facility that takes the word "overkill" to new heights, it'll keep you busier than an old lady with a row of vacant slot machines. Heck, it even promotes gambling via its pressure wagering concept. Yet underneath all that glitz lies a mediocre physics engine and a game that's simply too "ported."

Juiced 2 looks great. Its interfaces are sophisticated, its tracks—most often plunked in the middle of some of the world's largest cities—are spectacular, and its blur effects drive home a tremendous sense of speed. But snappy visuals are only part of the appeal. Developer Juice Games devised an impressively intricate goal-oriented system that keeps you engrossed in a multitude of compelling tasks (and evolves your "DNA," which others can then reference online), even if you're not winning a given race.

However, *Juiced 2*'s cars don't drive anything like real cars, or all but the dirtiest arcade, they feel rudimentary and herky-jerky. They bounce off walls like a pinball off a cushion. What's worse: The game doesn't support many of today's most popular controllers. PC drivers may be able to forgive obvious console port blemishes such as menus that don't allow you to use your mouse and intriguing Xbox 360 references. But a PC racer that forces you to use an Xbox 360 gamepad is just wrong. ●**Gord Goble**

UNDERNEATH ALL THE GLITZ LIES A MEDIOCRE PHYSICS ENGINE AND A GAME THAT'S SIMPLY TOO "PORTED."

●**Your DNA evolves automatically as you drive—or, in this case, drift.**

VERDICT

- **Glitzy presentation; highly imaginative concepts; a tuner's paradise.**
- **Unforgivable controller/driving wheel support issues; simplistic physics.**

6/10
AVERAGE
Games for Windows

The challenge AI makes the lack of multiplayer a minor problem

ARMAGEDDON EMPIRES

Quite the gaming revelation

PUBLISHER: **Cryptic Comet** DEVELOPER: **Vic Davis** GENRE: **Turn-Based Strategy** AVAILABILITY: **E-tail (www.crypticcomet.com)** ESRB RATING: **Not Rated**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **800MHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 200MB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **Final E-tail**

REVIEW

When a genre falls on hard times, count on its fans to pick it back up again. In the same spirit as *Falcon 4.0*'s adoption by the flight-sim community (it came out in 1998, and it's *still* popular), we've watched turn-based-strategy projects like the free *The Battle for Wesnoth* and the very indie *Dominions* series admirably fill the gaps in a genre that's seen more prolific days. Cryptic Comet's *Armageddon Empires*—arguably 2007's best strategy game—is yet another of these small-company masterpieces.

Armageddon Empires explores the political and anthropological possibilities of four separate factions fighting over a devastated Earth. Who would win? The game answers this question with a clever hybrid system that combines collectible card game–like deck building with a board game–style map and movement mechanics. Resources collected from the map allow you to turn cards from your hand into game pieces. You build bases and outposts (which create reinforcements), and fight battles that revel in the mass rolling of dice. Watch 'em spin!

The genius of the design lies in the game's habit of presenting you with clear choices that have no easy answers. Solutions come both from initial deck builds and subsequent hand management. For example, the game places a premium on reconnaissance due to the extensive fog-of-war mechanics; you can try to take advantage of this by including lots of recon units in your deck or hope to land a knockout blow with heavier (and slower) units while conceding that your opponent will be a step ahead of you in battlefield intelligence. Technology and air power are other elements in which you can invest, which means skimping elsewhere. The card selections have definite winners and losers, too—which invites serious study.

> THE POST-APOCALYPTIC ATMOSPHERE IS A PRODUCT OF A LEVEL OF ART DESIGN YOU EXPECT FROM LARGER-BUDGET GAMES.

HERE'S LOOKING AT YOU, KID

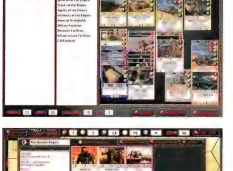
Part of the game's charm stems from Cryptic Comet's investment in artwork. The components look beautiful, with attractive card art and a sparse but elegant map. While the gameplay stands on its own, the aesthetics enhance the theme and demonstrate just how important presentation is—even in hardcore strategy games. The postapocalyptic atmosphere is a product of a level of art design that you expect (but often don't get) from much larger-budget games.

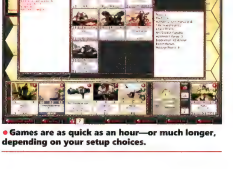
Armageddon Empires runs on low-end machines (PC and Mac!), the try-before-you-buy demo gives you a good idea of whether or not you'll like the full game, and you can even download the manual for free. Developer Vic Davis has been great about considering player input for patches, so if you make a good suggestion about improving the game, chances are he'll at least listen. He's also committed to a free "miniupgrade" in the next year, which will incorporate some additional faction cards and independent units. Davis and his game just go to show that sometimes, the oldest (and friendliest) gaming business models work the best. **Bruce Geryk**

VERDICT

- **Brilliant combination of CCG and board game.**
- **No multiplayer.**

9/10
EXCELLENT
Games for Windows





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1UP NETWORK

PUBLISHER: **Matrix Games** DEVELOPER: **Marshall Ellis/Outfinish Strategy Wargames** GENRE: **Turn-Based Strategy** AVAILABILITY: **E-tail (arwm.matrixgames.com)** ESRB RATING: **Not Rated** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **700MHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 200MB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER: **2-6 players (play-by-e-mail only)** VERSION REVIEWED: **Final E-tail**

REVIEW

No one questions whether Avalon Hill's *Empires in Arms* is a classic board war game—it's perhaps one of the great multiplayer war games of the past 30 years. As a simulation of the Napoleonic Wars, it encompasses intense negotiation and balance-of-power politics in a way that can only be done justice by seven human adversaries. And that, of course, is the problem with this port.

Given the current state of game A.I., it's foolish to believe a small-company effort like this one could provide anything resembling a decent computer opponent, when the game mechanics depend on tactical coordination and big-picture awareness on the part of each major nation. Predictably, *Empires in Arms*' digital brain fails to mount any kind of serious threat, either singly or en bloc. If you're an old veteran who's been looking forward to a suitable substitute for finding six living, breathing opponents, you're completely out of luck.

But what if you're just a latecomer hoping for an introduction to this outstanding pastime? Once again, the designers seem to have forgotten you, as the game makes no attempt to guide you through its complexities—no tutorial, no easily digestible introductory text in the manual, and no other tools to teach you, other than a small-print, PDF rules tome for your perusal. Furthermore, the only scenario included is the 1805-1815 grand campaign, making it impossible to use the board game's smaller scenarios (like the invasion of Russia) to get your feet wet. Let's not even mention the archaic interface and all of its problems.

GROGNARD OR BUST

It's clear that *Empires in Arms* is aimed squarely at *Empires in Arms* vets who already know the rules and just want to play each other via e-mail (since the game otherwise lacks the capability for Internet play). The manual even boasts that one of the game's strengths is its ability to adjudicate the rules and eliminate arguments. That's nice, because this happens to be the only advantage it has over the completely free VASSAL module of *Empires in Arms*, which lets those same grognards connect for simultaneous online play. If the rules arguments among adults playing this game become that intractable, perhaps everyone would just be better off playing another game altogether.

> SMALL PORTS OF COMPLICATED BOARD GAMES WILL ALWAYS FOUNDER ON THOSE ORIGINAL DESIGNS' COMPLEX A.I. REQUIREMENTS.

This is just the latest proof of the theorem that small-company ports of complicated board games—especially those designed for multiplayer—will always founder on those original designs' complex A.I. requirements, with the many required man-hours resulting in long development times that leave games stuck with an archaic presentation and interface design. The fact that this game is finally available *at all* is an achievement for the developer. At least you can use it to tinker around on an *Empires in Arms* board on your PC with the rules being enforced properly...but it's no substitute for the real game. **Bruce Geryk**

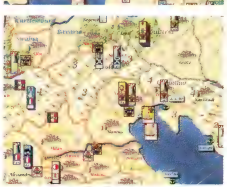
VERDICT

- **Workmanlike adaptation of a classic game.**
- **Not much more than a play-by-e-mail tool.**

5/10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows



Empires depicts battles somewhat abstractly and resolves them with die rolls.

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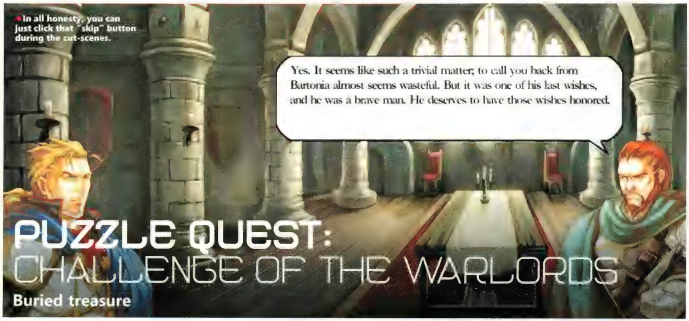

In all honesty, you can just click that "skip" button during the cut-scenes.
Yes. It seems like such a trivial matter, to call you back from Bartonia almost seems wasteful. But it was one of his last wishes, and he was a brave man. He deserves to have those wishes honored.
PUZZLE QUEST:
CHALLENGE OF THE WARLORDS
Buried treasure

PUBLISHER: **D3Publisher/Vatosoft** DEVELOPER: **Infinite Interactive** GENRE: **Puzzle/RPG/Strategy** AVAILABILITY: **Retail, E-tail (www.gamersgate.com)** ESRB RATING: **Everyone 10+** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 105MB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER: **2 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

REVIEW

EDITOR'S CHOICE Games for Windows The Official Magazine

As my head hits the pillow, my mind instantly races with the sorts of obsessive thoughts usually reserved for games like *World of WarCraft* or *Final Fantasy*. How do I beat that insane boss? Do I need to grind out another level's worth of XP? Where do I put my next few ability points? Which piece of badass gear should I buy next? And then I remember that I'm getting all hot and bothered over what is, at its core, a casual puzzle game. What's going on here?

Bejeweled's match-three puzzles, *Final Fantasy*'s level- (and equipment-) based character growth, *Pokémon*'s gotta-catch-em-all shtick, *Fire Emblem*'s corny anime-style cut-scenes, and even a touch of *Civilization*'s world-domination game—*Puzzle Quest* clumps these disparate elements together under the auspices of a giant fantasy-world map, where various NPCs assign quests to hunt down this or that monster. Your "battles" take the form of matching colorful jewel-shaped trios: Broken gems equate to like-colored mana, while a trinity of skulls saps your opponent's health, and purple stars and money piles earn you extra XP and gold, respectively.

It's not just *Bejeweled* with hit points, though; each of four available character classes (Druid, Knight, Warrior, and Wizard) offers a unique selection of spells that slowly unlock as you level up, and learning how to use and effectively combo these spells (and allocate training points to your assorted combat stats) is where the fun lies. For instance, my Wizard rocks a mean fireball that instantly clears any 3-by-3 grid of gems, as well as a handy spell that steals the opponent's all-important red ("fire") mana. Equippable items (such as my ax, which frequently awards extra turns) and unlockable party members (my Half-Elf pal provides an off-the-top advantage against undead foes) add more strategic layers. All told, it's a pretty *epic* match-three game.

The ancillary modes and options make *Puzzle Quest* even more of a timesink: Repeated bouts against randomly spawned monsters that you've already slain thrice enable you to "capture" the foes in question (via a variant "eliminate all the gems on the board" minigame). You can then research their abilities (i.e., play additional variant puzzle modes), leading to additional spells and stat bonuses. This all occurs in the game's main city, where you spend money to build forges, stables, mage towers, siege engines, and other all-important structures. Oh, and you can sack *other* cities, enabling steady revenue and remote access to the aforementioned facilities (and more minigame opportunities, as peasants tend to revolt). *Puzzle Quest*'s profusion of activities and diversions keeps you shackled to it like some sort of Disney theme park or sinister Las Vegas casino-hotel—as clichéd as it might sound, I don't know if I've ever seen another game that hits the "just one more round..." nerves quite this hard.

I daresay *Puzzle Quest* is to casual games what *World of WarCraft* is to MMORPGs: a vast, complex piece of entertainment that embraces all the very best concepts of its genre and improves upon them tenfold. Whoever you are, and whatever you're into, you absolutely *need* to play this game. ● **Ryan Scott**

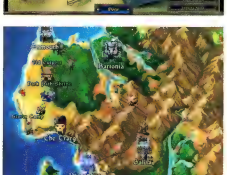
PUZZLE QUEST IS TO CASUAL GAMES WHAT WORLD OF WARCRAFT IS TO MMORPGS.

VERDICT

- **A near-perfect synthesis of all the most addictive game genres.**
- **No online matchmaking—and that's a crying shame.**

10/10 EXCELLENT

Games for Windows The Official Magazine



● ***Puzzle Quest*'s world is apparently the same one from the *Warlords* strategy-RPG series. How wonderfully...strange and random.**

AMAZING ADVENTURES: THE LOST TOMB

Where's my mummy?

PUBLISHER: PopCap Games DEVELOPER: SpinTop Games GENRE: Puzzle
AVAILABILITY: E-tail (www.popcap.com or www.steampowered.com)
ESRB RATING: Everyone MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 350MHz CPU, 75MB RAM, 45MB hard drive space MULTIPLAYER: None VERSION REVIEWED: Final 1.0

REVIEW

Amazing Adventures: The Lost Tomb isn't particularly amazing or much of an adventure, but you're not going to sell many copies of your game if you call it *Somewhat Tedious Puzzles*, so we'll forgive the indiscretion. The object here is to scour one cluttered screen after another in search of hidden objects (à la *Where's Waldo?*). "The Lost Tomb" refers to the fact that the game "takes place" in Egypt, but all this really means is that you look for tire pumps and gas masks hidden within a big screen of, say, a pyramid.

The game features 20 missions, each with multiple levels to complete. The goal of every level is exactly the same: Find 10 specific objects. It's timed, so you're theoretically "pressured" to finish, but really—if you can't find 10 objects in 20 minutes, you probably aren't far enough on the evolutionary ladder to download this game (especially considering the big "Hint" button, too).

The big problem is that *Lost Tomb* doesn't convey a sense of progression. What seems fun at first wears out its welcome quickly once you realize that the gameplay never changes, nor do the levels themselves, other than getting slightly less time in later rounds. You'll revisit the same screens (and objects) over and over, so it never feels like you're getting anywhere.

Still, it feels mean to pick on such a casual game. And I *did* find this to be the perfect accompaniment to boring phone calls, because 99.9 percent of the gameplay is just a matter of moving your eyes around the screen, so no one can hear telltale mouse or keyboard clicks. That's worth two of those six points right there! ● **Jeff Green**

VERDICT

- **Easy, time-wasting casual puzzle game, good for marking time.**
- **Not enough variety; not very challenging; hurts the eyes after awhile.**

6 \10
AVERAGE
Games for Windows

● **Two Egyptian guys sit around discussing why they have phones and fish on their heads.**

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If you purchased the video game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* ("*GTA:SA*") before July 20, 2005, you may be part of a class action Settlement. This Notice is just a summary. For more complete information, you should read the full Notice. You can get a copy of the full Notice by calling the number or visiting the Web site below.

What is the Class Action Lawsuit About?

The lawsuit claims that Defendants, Take-Two Interactive Software, Inc. and its subsidiary Rockstar Games, Inc., manufactured and sold *GTA:SA* with hidden content that, if unlocked by the user, could display scenes of a sexual nature, which became known as the "Hot Coffee" scenes. The lawsuit claims the marketing of the game with this content under an improper rating violated Consumer Protection laws.

Who is Included?

The Class includes everyone who bought *GTA:SA* before July 20, 2005. Resellers are not included in the Class.

What Are the Terms of the Settlement?

Class members who meet certain eligibility conditions may be able to claim cash payments ranging from $5 to $35, and/or to exchange the game for a copy without the content at issue. For full details about the qualifications to make a claim you should read the full Notice.

Who Represents Me?

The Court has appointed attorneys to represent the Class. You may hire your own attorney, if you wish. However, you will be responsible for that attorney's fees and expenses. Class Counsel will ask the Court for an award of attorneys' fees and reimbursement of expenses in the amount of $1,000,000. This amount includes approximately $955,000 in attorneys' fees and approximately $45,000 for reimbursement of expenses. Defendants have agreed to and will not oppose this request. The Court may consider the request at the Final Approval Hearing on **June 25, 2008 at 10:30 a.m.**

What Are My Legal Rights?

- If you wish to stay in the Class, you do not have to do anything. If you want to get a benefit you must file a claim as explained below. If the Court approves the Settlement, you will be bound by all the Court's orders. This means you cannot sue the Defendants covered by the Settlement in the future.
- If you qualify, you must complete a claim form to receive any payment. Depending on the kind of proof of purchase you have, you may be eligible for different amounts of cash payments. You can get a Claim Form by calling the toll-free number or visiting the Web site below. Claim Forms must be postmarked no later than **May 16, 2008**.
- If you do not wish to be a member of the Class, you must submit a letter to the Settlement Administrator indicating that you do not want to be a member of the Class postmarked no later than **April 25, 2008**. If you request to be excluded from the Class you cannot make a claim for a cash payment under this Settlement.
- You can tell the Court if you do not like this Settlement or some part of it if you do not exclude yourself. To object or comment, you must send a letter to the Court postmarked no later than **April 25, 2008**.

Will the Court Approve the Settlement?

The Court will hold a Final Approval Hearing on **June 25, 2008 at 10:30 a.m.** to consider whether the Proposed Settlement is fair, reasonable, and adequate and the motion for attorneys' fees and expenses.

For a Notice of Proposed Class Action Settlement and a Claim Form

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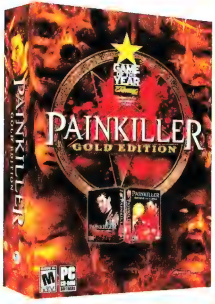
THE HOT LIST

Five still-available games to buy right now

EDITORS' CHOICE

We love good games. Especially really, really good games. Here are five that earned our esteemed Editors' Choice award upon their initial reviews.



PAINKILLER

Developer People Can Fly's insane horror-themed first-person shooter *Painkiller* made such an impression on us that we gave it our Shooter of the Year award back in 2004. Yes, it beat out both *Doom 3* and *Half-Life 2*—and we're still scratching our heads over that particular decision. But that doesn't change the fact that *Painkiller* (along with its expansion *Battle Out of Hell*, which is included in the retail Gold Edition) is one of the best—and most old school, given its heavy focus on nonstop carnage—first-person shooters in recent years.

GTR 2

Once upon a time, console jerks didn't dominate the PC-racing landscape, and early-racing devel- opers such as Papyrus unleashed an onslaught of unforgettable hardcore sims that were solely for the PC. In 2005, Swedish studio Simbin resurrected that dream with its sports car–loaded GTR, a game so unforgiving and enthralling as it is beautiful. 2006's GTR 2 adds more cars, more tracks, a new damage model, and more content. That today's hardware better translates all those physics and graphics is even more reason to jump behind the wheel.

SWAT 4

The *SWAT* series began its life as a spin-off of Sierra's *Police Quest* adventures, eventually dropping the name association as of *SWAT 3*. After canceling the originally planned third sequel (*SWAT: Urban Justice*), publisher Vivendi turned the reins over to Irrational Games, who crafted an expert, tension-filled tactical-ops sim that combines smart, proactive teammate A.I. with a cleverly streamlined U.I. Now if only we could get another sequel starring ace *Police Quest* detective Sonny Bonds....

SPLINTER CELL: CHAOS THEORY

Third time's the charm: Government black ops agent Sam Fisher's third stealth-action adventure is his best. Unlike previous *Splinter Cells*, *Chaos Theory* affords substantial freedom thanks to far less stringent mission parameters and comparatively nonlinear level design. The robbery of a Panamanian bank is the game's standout scenario, and the 2-on-2 multiplayer mode's mandatory tutorial gives you a bit of competence before throwing you to the wolves online.

THE SIMS 2

Either you love it or you love it and just don't want to admit it to your friends (even though they probably play it, too). Quirky life simulator The Sims 2 was by far the expansion-pack king among Rated-T-ownership-envy sadists (the people who lock their Sims in a small room with no bathroom—you know who you are), and Sims who just want to play with dolls.

REVIEW INDEX

Game names in yellow indicate *GFW* Editors' Choice award winners

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Blazing Angels 2: Secret Missions of WWII	4	13
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Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock	9	14
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Viva Piñata	8	15
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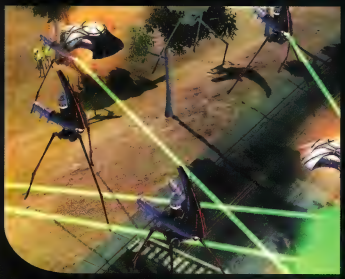
The Field Inverters chew through Tom's zombies.



Saucers versus Field Inverters.

INSIDE

PATCHES
Updates
We review two big MMO updates and a *Battlefield 2* mod that ain't all it can be.

MMORPGS
Crisis on Infinite Servers
Columnist Cindy Yans gives us a peek at the MMO stock market.

PODCAST
Sound Off
The *GFW* crew muses on where they feel *Duke Nukem Forever* should go.

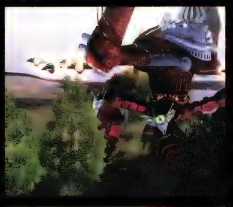
TOM vs. ERIK

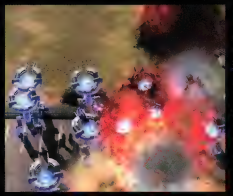
Two gamers enter. One gamer wins.

UNIVERSE AT WAR

With Bruce mysteriously absent, Tom and *Portal* writer Erik Wolpaw battle it out in WWII for the future of Earth

PUBLISHER **Sega** DEVELOPER **Petroglyph Games** GENRE **Real-Time Strategy** ESRB RATING **Teen**





A glamour shot of Erik's first Constructor.

COLUMN

Tom Chick

Prominent freelance videogame critic Tom Chick also runs the popular website QuarterToThree.com.

Erik Wolpaw

Erik's talent for snarky writing landed him a job at Valve Software, where he recently acted as head writer on *Portal*.

This month, Bruce again asks professional game writer Erik Wolpaw to cover for him. The game is *Company of Heroes: Opposing Fronts*. Erik plays the Panzer Elite and Tom plays the British.

ERIK: The last time I filled in for Bruce, Tom and I played *The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth*. Tom won mostly because I can't get very worked up about fighting over a ring. Tom, on the other hand, is passionate about rings. And brooches, diamond heart necklaces, hair products, makeup, and women's magazines that teach you how to use all of these lady things to become more attractive to men. Tom tells me that this time we're going to play *Company of Heroes: Opposing Fronts*. It's a WWII game in which you fight for freedom, something aspiring nanny-state busybody Tom can pretty much take or leave. I love freedom, though, so I figure I'm going to have the motivational edge in this one.

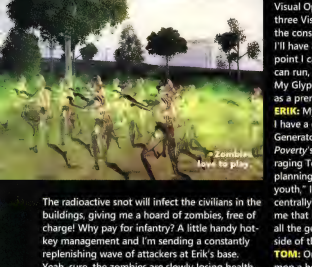
TOM: Our attempts to play *Company of Heroes* are interrupted by THQ's and Relic's latest attempt to discourage their fan base: The newest patch won't work, and the game won't let us in unless we're patched. Also, it seems that my account has been banned because I tried to get the original LAN-friendly game to work with more than one copy of the expansion, which is apparently piracy. We fumble around a bit with the game's Kafkaesque postrelease support before giving up for the day and agreeing to play our second choice the next day: *Universe at War: Earth Assault*.

ERIK: I've never heard of this game or the universal war on which it is evidently based.

TOM: *Universe at War* is a real-time strategy game about anime robots fighting aliens in *War of the Worlds*–style walkers with this other third faction in the background that no one wants to play. Erik elects to play the anime robots (aka the good guys) while I opt to play the aliens (aka the bad guys). Since I don't expect Erik to be very aggressive, what with this being a new game for us, I'm going to build three Reapers right off the bat instead of going straight to something military. My three Reapers trot off to gather resources for me by sucking up trees, houses, people, cows, and so forth. Then I'll send my Glyph Carver to the center of the map while I save up money to get a military going. In the early stages of the game, except for reaping suburbs, you might think that I come in peace. In fact, coming in apparent peace might not be a bad strategy.

ERIK: I immediately get busy continuing to stew over not getting to play the WWII game by instructing my new robot to storm angrily back and forth in front of my one building. Tom messages me to ask how I'm doing. I tell him it looks like my robots are only good at constructing power lines and recycling centers and other nonthreatening public works–style junk. I tell him this in all-capital letters to kind of drive home the bitter unfairness of it all. Tom then tells me that *Universe at War* is a part of the "serious games" movement, that what the universe is at war against is poverty and social injustice, and that the whole thing is basically a cooperative city-planning game.

TOM: Once it's time to turn to the whole conquest part of an alien invasion, most folks would call down a Habitat Walker to get started with infantry production. Maybe a nice army of imposing Grunts or a Lost One pod to bring in some of the classic greys. But not me. I prefer my money for nothing and my infantry for free. Here's how that works: Once I've saved up enough money, I call down the Assembly Walker, which builds vehicles. I'll build a Defiler pod on the walker and then make a set of three Defilers. I'll put these guys on bleed mode so they'll drool out deadly green radioactive snot, and I'll send them to nearby buildings on the map. >



The radioactive snot will infect the civilians in the buildings, giving me a hoard of zombies, free of charge! Why pay for infantry? A little handy hotkey management and I'm sending a constantly replenishing wave of attackers at Erik's base. Yeah, sure, the zombies are slowly losing health, but I don't expect them to live long anyway.

ERIK: I have no reason to doubt Tom, because convincing me that we're not supposed to fight each other would be a cheap trick even for him. This leads to my first major tactical error: underestimating Tom's commitment to cheating. At this point, however, I'm still blissfully unaware of Tom's chicanery. If intrusive social planning is the key to victory, then, by god, I'm going to turn this barren wasteland into a people's utopia whether the people like it or not. I build a couple of basic structures and then abandon the starting area and begin to build a new base more toward the center of the map, where I think the infrastructure improvements I'm planning will do the most good for the most number of the people's children.

TOM: Unfortunately, Erik seems to have anticipated me this time. I shouldn't be too surprised since we had a few test games where I beat him four or five times with my cheap zombie rush. So where his base should be I find only his initial Command Core. My zombies mill about for a bit, confused and not particularly aggressive. They are mindless, after all, which is one of the *rare* examples of an effective A.I. in *Universe at War*. So I order the confused zombies to attack Erik's Command Core. They bang away at it mindlessly but effectively. It's like a scene from George Romero's *Day of the Dead* (or, if you're under 35, *Resident Evil: Extinction*).

ERIK: I get a system message saying there's some kind of attack going on at my old, abandoned starting compound. It's definitely not Tom, because according to a message he just sent me, he's on the eastern edge of the map raising funds to build a "Habitat." For humanity, I'm guessing. That means the attack is probably coming from some A.I.-controlled form of injustice, like bullying maybe. Unfortunately, I'm too busy laying power lines to deal with it right now.

TOM: Meanwhile, I've covered all my Assembly Walker's nodes with armor plating just in case it does come under fire. I'm using it to crank out a fleet of Saucers, which are the equivalent of alien cavalry. These little hovering guys are fast. Since they fly, they're immune to ground attacks. They fire plasma orbs that eat away at enemy units, but they can also toggle over to repair duty. Again, this will come in handy if my walker comes under attack. I'm researching my Assault line of tech up to level 3, which will give me Visual Optimizers for a Science Walker. If I build three Visual Optimizers on a Science Walker (at the considerable cost of 1,000 resources each!), I'll have line of sight to the entire map, at which point I can taunt Erik with the classic line: "You can run, but you can't hide." "Literally," I'll add. My Glyph Carver calls down a Detection Drone as a prerequisite for the Science Walker.

ERIK: My new base is really coming together. I have a couple of Constructors and a Flow Generator, which is *Universe at War Against Poverty*'s poetic name for power plant. I'm barraging Tom with messages about my plans. "I'm planning a midnight basketball league for at-risk youth," I say. "Now I'm planning the economy, centrally!" I say. Tom remains silent. It occurs to me that he simply doesn't want to take credit for all the good deeds he's probably doing on his side of the map. I am shattered by his humility.

TOM: Once my Assault tech hits level two, I summon a hero named Orlok the Eternal and park him next to a house. I can use his Siege mode attack to send an artillery strike anywhere on the map where I have line of sight, which I can easily get with my Detection Drone's scan ability. To recharge the attack, Orlok simply sucks up some resources from the nearby house. It's a devastating tactic with no cooldown time beyond refueling from the house. Short of hunting down Orlok and killing him, there's no counter for this.

ERIK: Tom's been silent for a few minutes, so I don't know how his Habitat for Humanity project is going. Things are going well for me, though. I've built a comprehensive, efficient power grid, two recycling centers, an airport, a hybrid vehicle plant, a factory that makes robots, and about 20 actual robots. Just as I'm about to send the robots on their first mission—to deliver meals to old people—a massive group of zombies staggers into my newly revitalized city center. Even though they're screaming and encased in a big yellow stink cloud, I figure, you know, what the heck. Who am I to judge their zombie lifestyle?

TOM: After scouting around with my army of Command Core–killing zombies, I see that Erik has established his base near the capturable location in the bottom center of the map. He's amassing an army of Field Inverters around a few defensive turrets. They quickly kill my zombies, who were dying anyway. So I scan the base with my Detection Drone to get line of sight, and I use Orlok's Siege mode to lob artillery attacks at his recycling centers and idle Field Inverter army.

ERIK: WHAT THE EFF? Although I'd hoped to never have to use my robots for violence or racism, I now instruct them to robot up and ethnically cleanse the map of Tom's stupid, evil effing zombies. As they melt the last of Tom's undead army, I message him: "Hope you remembered to have a free and fair election to elect a soil commissioner—BECAUSE I'M GOING TO BURY YOU!" I waste a few precious seconds wondering if that zinger made as much sense in real life as it had in the world of my imagination, where I'd just recently spent a few more seconds imagining Tom's shock at how clever it was. I decide it doesn't make any difference, a decision that takes a few more seconds. With the zinger episode over, I'm ready to begin this war in earnest.

TOM: Erik's Field Inverters quickly kill my zombies, who were dying anyway. So I scan the base with my Detection Drone to get line of sight, and I use Orlok's Siege mode to lob artillery attacks at his recycling centers and idle Field Inverter army.

ERIK: Here's a curious development: It's raining fire. I ask Tom if it's raining fire where he is. He says there are gouts of fire coming out of one of his dudes and shooting into the sky! I ask him to look into that because I think the fire is landing on my Flow Generator.

TOM: *Universe at War* isn't a very friendly game, either in terms of being intuitive or well-documented. For instance, just from playing the game and reading the manual, I never would have known about the bleeding Defiler trick for making zombies or how you recharge Orlok's artillery by eating a piece of a house. I read about that stuff online. This gives me a huge advantage over Erik, who doesn't have the foresight to thoroughly research his games before playing them. Silly man.

ERIK: Time to take stock: Most of my base is still intact. I have resources flowing in and enough production facilities to convert those resources into a deadly robot army. Best of all, I have a bunch of Field Inverters, which are sort of hard to describe. They look like hot plates on stilts, I guess. Unless you're a can of soup, they're not super intimidating to look at. They do, however, pack a real wallop, and they have a secondary ability that lets them form a protective shield over themselves and all nearby units. So screw it. I'm through waiting for Tom to come to me. Even though I wasn't technically waiting for Tom to come to me earlier. The point is: Recent events have shown that Tom's zombies are no match for my Field Inverters, so this fight is coming straight to him.

TOM: Erik's army moves out. I intercept them with my fleet of Saucers. They are paper to his rocks, rocks to his scissors, and scissors to his paper. Swarms of glowing plasma orbs latch on to the Field Inverters and eat them to death. Meanwhile, I have Orlok hotkeyed so I can keep calling in the artillery and chomping on houses to reload.

ERIK: In these war games, Tom is really, really good at providing support for his troops. Which is weird, because in real life Tom doesn't support the troops at all. I should have remembered all of this before I sent my Field Inverters marching straight into Tom's backup force of Flying Saucers. I won't get into the ugly details, but if you're ever on some sort of presidential weapons advisory board and the president asks you if America should build Field Inverters or Flying Saucers, trust me, pick Flying Saucers.

TOM: The Field Inverters are killed, and the Saucers move in to finish off Erik's base. The Assembly Walker slowly approaches from behind the Saucers to help mop up.

ERIK: Remember how in that *Twilight Zone* episode an alien book called *To Serve Man* turned out to be a cookbook? In a similar way, Tom's "Habitat" turns out to be a f***ing 50 meter-tall tank—pardon my French system of measurement. That's the last thing my last unit—the original Constructor—sees before the lights go out for good.

WINNER:
TOM

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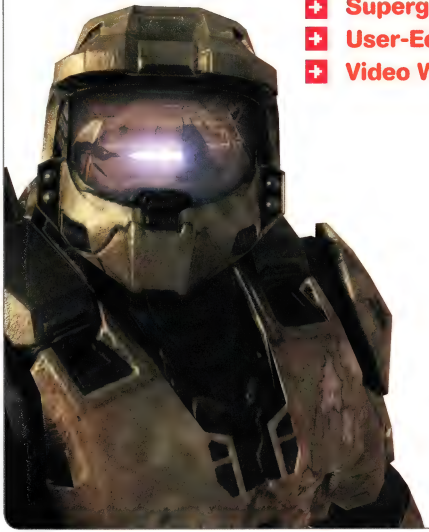


1UP NETWORK

LINE OF ATTACK

Your monthly guide to hardcore war-gaming

COLUMN

Bruce Geryk

Bruce Geryk—brainy brain surgeon by day—is *GFW*'s resident expert on anything involving a hex grid.

Fifteen or 20 years ago, war gamers dreamed of somehow bringing their cardboard favorites to life on the computer, in any way possible. Bad interface? No problem. Stupid A.I.? Who cares? In fact, no A.I. would be fine—just play your favorites by e-mail. I remember those days...but I don't feel that way now.

That's why I have such mixed feelings about this month's long-awaited PC conversion of *Empires in Arms*—the classic board game from Australian Design Group, republished by Avalon Hill in 1985. It was horribly overdue two years ago, and even though the final product leaves something to be desired in terms of interface and A.I. (see my full review on page 70), it's still a nice accomplishment for essentially *one* programmer.

What niche does this game fill, though? If you want PBEM capability, products like Cyberboard and Aide de Camp already have that covered. In fact, those products allow you to use original game graphics, making it look like you're playing on a computer reproduction of the map board. Sure, they won't enforce the rules for you, but since you already need to know the rules well in order to play, how much of an advantage is that? Sure, a standardized game engine eliminates any potential rules disputes, and acts as an impartial rules enforcer...but unless you're playing with people who take the game way too seriously, these kinds of disputes should be easy to settle without a digital referee.

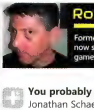
If you feel like a trip back to 1995, the interface and graphics have got you covered.

It's easy to dismiss these projects as quixotic and doomed to underperform, due to the long development times and limited resources. I admire the commitment Marshall Ellis (*Empires in Arms*' lead developer) and others demonstrate by completing something this complex, though I'd rather see what kinds of original material these guys could come up with. War-gaming needs innovators, not curators. ●

FALLING PIECES

The best in casual games

COLUMN



Robert Coffey

Former *CGW* editor Robert Coffey now spends his days playing word games and block puzzles. What a life!

You probably didn't notice, but Dr. Jonathan Schaeffer killed idyllic Norman Rockwell–style summertime front-porch gaming last July. While he didn't personally (as far as we know) push your granddad in front of a bus or poison the pitcher of lemonade, he proved that checkers is little more than a more evolved version of tic-tac-toe—if neither player errs, the game invariably ends in a draw. Fun, huh?

Schaeffer began the Chinook program back in 1989, intending to create a checkers A.I. that would win the world championship. Chinook qualified to play for the top prize in 1990, lost the championship match in 1992, and won in 1994. That feat made Chinook the first computer program to win a human world championship in any game (those Deep Blue vs. Kasparov chess matches weren't for any titles). The program never lost a match from then until its retirement in 1997.

Schaeffer restarted the project in 2001 with the hope of creating the perfect checkers program. Using an everyday average of 50 computers running at a time (with up to 200 computers running at peak times), Schaeffer built upon rules of thumb he collected from checkers experts to compute some 500,000,000,000,000,000,000 checkers positions. Eventually, the rules of thumb were abandoned as Chinook's checkers knowledge surpassed that of humanity. The result, some six years later, is an A.I. that always knows the perfect move in any given situation. If you played IT'S A LOSER'S GAME

Pleasant summer days passed in the company of one's friends...all meaningless now.

IF YOU DIDN'T FORESEE CHINOOK AGAINST ANOTHER MASTER YOU'D COULD HELP FOR IS A DRAW.

to perfection against Chinook, the best you could hope for is a draw...and confirmation that you are apparently the final unknown Cylon model.

But don't take my word for it: You can stare down this harbinger of our inevitable robot overlords at www.cs.ualberta.ca/~chinook. Just don't expect the steely bastard to open the pod bay doors after you're done. As for me, I'll be over here playing lawn darts by the kiddie pool. That's one summer pastime I'm betting Dr. Schaeffer *can't* ruin. ●

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UPDATES

Our two cents on the latest mods and patches

Wafting smoke marks points of interest on desert maps, though "interest" is relative.

FORGOTTEN HOPE 2

The best-left-Forgotten War

PUBLISHER: **Forgotten Hope Mod Team** DEVELOPER: **Forgotten Hope Mod Team** GENRE: **First-Person Shooter** AVAILABILITY: **Free Download (http://forgottenhope.filefront.com)** ESRB RATING: **Not Rated** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.7GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 1.8GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard, *Battlefield 2*** MULTIPLAYER: **2-64 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Version 2.0**

MOD REVIEW

Rule number one for Authentic War Mods: Any caliber bullet, fired from any gun, striking any body part, must have to cripple, kill, or otherwise ruin the day of its victim. I'm not sure who originally codified this rule, or what body of fun-crushing realism ministers keeps it afloat despite overwhelming evidence (see: abandoned servers) that it is not a beloved mechanic worth nurturing. But for better or worse, it's an idea that thrives in the mod community—"better" being *Red Orchestra*, "worse" being *Forgotten Hope 2*, a *Battlefield 2* total conversion mod focusing on the North African campaign of World War II.

WELCOME TO THE SUCK

In his memoir *Jarhead*, author and former U.S. Marine Anthony Swofford describes his time in the first Gulf War as a fight more against stifling downtime than enemy combatants. By that definition of war, *FH2*'s desert maps are as authentic a portrayal of combat as any in videogaming—a long, slow, frustrating journey toward a split second's worth of exploding. Too-large maps necessitate mechanized transport, but too-strong shells lobbed by cannons outside your view are liable to end any trek before you can reach a pitched battle.

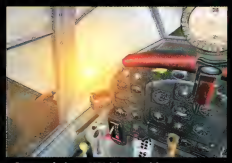
This kind of trial-and-error (or in this case, travel-and-error) respawn looping is nothing new to the *Battlefield* series, but the problem is particularly egregious here because the flat landscape of the desert leaves you with a single direction to go in case of trouble: down, either on your belly in a trench, or on your back with a bullet in your chest. Without the urban architecture of *BF2*'s maps to provide cover, escaping capture points besieged by armor becomes comically difficult, so much so that the "suicide" button should've been relabeled "tactical withdrawal." Dying to fight another day is a theme far too prevalent in *FH2*.

Strategic options diversify on the infantry-heavy city maps, but the list of benchmarks necessary to have a good game is still overwhelming: If you manage to find a team to fight *with*, a street, building or flag to fight *for*, and similarly minded opponents to square off *against*, *FH2* offers a passable amount of fun. But it seems that the mod team did everything possible to keep that setup a pipe dream, from creating oppressively large maps to coding the game on the buggy, slow-loading *BF2* engine.

SO IT GOES

And those realism ministers I mentioned earlier? They might not truck with this game, either. On top of its numerous problems, of which I've only addressed a few, *FH2* lacks the logic that makes better realism mods work—the logic that says a poorly aimed shell will deflect off of the sloped armor of a tank, or that airplanes can't ascend indefinitely without losing airspeed or stalling.

We should have lend-leased the British a new color scheme.



Contemplating a HALO jump without a parachute.

The pulse-pounding reality of a world at war.

FH2 finds itself straddling a line between realism and *BF2* ridiculousness, and that's a pretty bad place to be.

If, in future updates to the mod, the *Forgotten Hope* team applies the same devotion to crafting a *game* that they've clearly dedicated to modeling and historical accuracy, they'll likely produce something worth downloading. As it stands, *Forgotten Hope 2* is more diorama than experience—something to look at, not play.

Rory Manion

VERDICT

Beautiful modeling; good intentions.

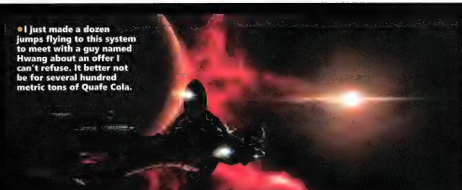
Battlefield 2 engine; map size.

4/10

BAD

Games for Windows

DYING TO FIGHT ANOTHER DAY IS A THEME FAR TOO PREVALENT IN *FORGOTTEN HOPE 2*.



I just made a dozen jumps flying to this system to meet with a guy named Hwang about an offer I can't refuse. It better not be for several hundred metric tons of Quafe Cola.

EVE ONLINE: TRINITY

Let there be light

PUBLISHER: **CCP Games** DEVELOPER: **CCP Games** GENRE: **MMORPG** AVAILABILITY: **Patch Download** ESRB RATING: **Teen** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.5GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 8GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard, Internet connection, *Eve Online*** MULTIPLAYER: **Massive-scale** VERSION REVIEWED: **4.10.45943**

PATCH REVIEW

Cutthroat sci-fi MMO *Eve Online* has run a steady course for roughly five years now, and the massive new *Trinity* update modernizes it with a nice user interface tune-up and long-awaited DirectX 10 graphical overhaul. Forget about space being a vacuum; *Trinity*'s lighting effects bring even more atmosphere to *Eve Online*'s universe, as you fly around the galaxy mining or trading or blowing up stuff in your choice of spacecraft. Oh, and the new 3D models for those ships look so good that the originals comparatively seem like cheap beta versions.

Even if you stick with the old DX9 graphics, *Trinity* features plenty of the usual stuff you'd expect to find in a big *Eve* update, such as lots of new ships to fly. How does a jump-capable freighter sound—or a battleship designed for deep incursions behind enemy lines? *Trinity* also allegedly adds new missions, though you wouldn't know it from talking to NPC agents; the missions seem as similar (and as repetitive) as ever. It's really *Eve*'s one glaring fault, though it's easy enough to ignore missions altogether, given the massive amount of other stuff to do.

With all of *Eve*'s complexity and unusually hardcore PVP conflict, a lot of people don't stick with it for very long. It's definitely a game that gives back what you put into it, and—as *Eve*'s very loyal fan base would tell you—the rewards justify the consequences. Any MMO fan interested in a good space opera should at least give *Eve* a spin, if only to check out the gorgeous eye candy that *Trinity* trots out. **Matthew Chase**

VERDICT

+ A gorgeous visual upgrade, with new content to boot.

– NPC agent missions could use an overhaul.

8/10

GOOD

Games for Windows

Putting a sword in each hand—every Scrapper's dream come true.

CITY OF HEROES: ISSUE 11—A STITCH IN TIME

Operation: Flashback

PUBLISHER: **NCsoft** DEVELOPER: **NCsoft** GENRE: **MMORPG** AVAILABILITY: **Patch Download** ESRB RATING: **Teen** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **800MHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 4GB hard drive space, Internet connection, *City of Heroes*** MULTIPLAYER: **Massive-scale** VERSION REVIEWED: **16.20071128.4T2**

PATCH REVIEW

If one thing sucks about *Issue 11: A Stitch in Time*—the latest free expansion to superhero MMORPG *City of Heroes*—it's that the developers stole my favorite character's name for the update's central NPC faction. Now, whenever people see Ouroboros, my Gravity Controller, they'll think *I'm* the unoriginal one. That aside, *Issue 11* rules.

One of *COH*'s most glaring long-standing problems: It's easy to out-level—and thus completely miss—entire story arcs and achievement badges. But thanks to *Issue 11*'s Menders of Ouroboros (a group of time-travelers out to "correct" mistakes in history), you won't need to worry about that anymore. In the Menders' surreal dimension, every mission you'd ever want to revisit is easily accessed from a handy new menu. You can even set mission parameters in order to get better rewards, thus incentivizing replayability in a manner that doesn't involve mindlessly leveling up yet another alt.

You may find yourself wanting to restart anyway, since *Issue 11* introduces two great new power sets for melee heroes and villains. Willpower focuses on reducing damage, while the flashy attacks in the Dual Blades tree feature a wicked new combo system—and, as icing on the cake, everybody can now customize their weaponry's appearance by using *COH*'s costume-editing tool. Now, all the *COH* team needs to fix is the agonizing leveling grind—hopefully by eliminating death penalties and introducing a bit more variety in the instanced maps. Too bad we can't time-travel to *that* future just yet. **Matthew Chase**

VERDICT

+ Convenient access to old mission content; two sleek new power sets.

– They still need to make the leveling treadmill feel like less of a treadmill.

8/10

GOOD

Games for Windows

CRISIS ON INFINITE SERVERS

Trekking across the vast MMORPG landscape

This month: Going, Going, Gone

COLUMN

Cindy Yans

Cindy is a financial analyst for Chase John Smith Barney and Friends.

I'm standing in the Gadgetzan auction house one day, and if non-*World of WarCraft* players—and I know plenty of you are out there—will forgive the vernacular, this is what I hear:

Evangelistica: Hey, LTNS!!!!!!
Evangelistica waves to D00mBoMatic.
D00mBoMatic dances with Evangelistica.
[I gag.]
Evangelistica: Whyd u leve the gild?
[I'm thinking, "Because you can't spell?"]
D00mBoMatic: I wasn't making any $$ on stooged raids. Loot rules, DKP crap, the usual. Why the heck prot Warriors aren't allowed to roll on the cool 2handers, slow onehanders, dps trinkets and armors, when DPS Warrs, Retri Pallys, Rouges, and Hunters (etc) can? We get stuck with boring pocketwatches, 1.6 speed swords that looks like bananas...ranged that only has STA on it etc. Whats up w THAT?
[Really annoyed that they're chatting out loud in public, I resist the urge to chime in. And because it's your lucky day, I'll also reserve my opinion about DKP rules and loot tables for another occasion, and I'll also avoid launching into a tirade about the continual misuse of the word "Rouge."]
Evangelistica: So, what r u doin thses days?
D00mBoMatic: Im bying and selling and the profets are rolling in like mae. I can aford all the best upgrades. And this here's the best AH in the game.
Evangelistica: All the auction houses are the same one.
D00mBoMatic: no this ones better than the one in Oggrimarr. I make tons and tons and tons of gold here all th time. U can't sell to Alliance there.
Evangelistica: No, really. They're all the same one. But anyway if ur so rich, why are u wearing a bright yellow tunic, ugly brown kilt, cherry red gloves, purple shoulders, and a wolf on your head?
[I'm thinking, "No! They're not the same one." I mean, "They're faction-based." I mean, "Forget it." I remind myself that it's really best to leave people to their delusions if that's what makes them happy—even allowing the inference that stealthy backstabbers are somehow all...red.]

I am surprisingly stubborn about accepting new ways to look at things, especially when it involves what is or isn't fun. After spending years making fun of folks who cook, fish, make balloon animals, etc., I eventually learned that crafting can create income. But after forever spending more money on components than I was making in profits, I only recently discovered that D00mBoMatic is actually right. Grrr! Broad knowledge of the in-game market, analysis of the stats to determine profitable investment strategies, and a sense of really good timing are all keys to financial success.

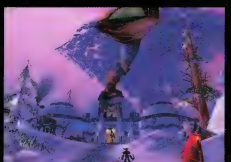
As an elementary example, in *WOW*, auctions with minimum bids significantly lower than proposed buyout prices are more likely to sell. If the price is reasonable, an item with a 100 gold buyout and a 20 gold minimum bid is as much as 25 percent more likely to attract consumers than the same item with a 90 gold minimum bid. In a society of bargain hunters, even clever people will look at the former and say, "Hey! I'm saving *a lot* more gold." Uhhhh...nope.

Then we have price management. The thrill of selling the stack of decayed Q-Tips I had cleverly priced lower than anyone else's was completely deflated when—less than half an hour later—the guy who bought them was selling them for 30 percent more.

Those MMO brokers and auction houses are a lot like the NASDAQ, but I wish I had learned this sooner. If I'd kept a much better handle on goretusk liver futures, I probably wouldn't be wearing this bright yellow tunic and a wolf on my head. ● **Cindy Yans**

● **Hey, will you get a load of that...gavel.**

● **Poor auctioneer Grizzlin doesn't do justice to the grandeur...**



● **...of the neutral Everlook auction house.**

I REMIND MYSELF THAT IT'S BEST TO LEAVE PEOPLE TO THEIR DELUSIONS IF THAT'S WHAT MAKES THEM HAPPY

SOUND OFF

Things you might hear on the GFW Radio podcast

ROUND TABLE

XTRAS

GFW RADIO
Games for Windows
THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

THE CREW

Got podcast comments? Hit the GFW message boards at boards.1UP.com, or send us feedback via e-mail at gfwletters@ziffdavis.com.

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Every week, the editors of *GFW* toss aside their inhibitions on *GFW Radio*, a podcast (it's like a magazine, only talked!) dedicated to what we love and loathe in the computer-gaming world. Subscribe at podcasts.1UP.com or the all-powerful iTunes Music Store. Want a sample of the hijinks? Here's a conversation around the office inspired by a recent podcast.

THIS MONTH'S TOPIC: The *Duke Nukem Forever* of our dreams?

SHAWN: Duke Nukem belongs to the time when bozos wore shirts that said "Kill 'em all and let God sort 'em out." He's entering an era where his good buddy Schwarzenegger is a governor and Jean-Claude Van Damme is a mage in *World of WarCraft*—see the "What's Your Game?" series of TV commercials. If Duke himself hasn't changed, his world has, and I hope 3D Realms runs with that in *Forever* rather than, say, redoing *This Is Spinal Tap* after a decade and stopping at a slicker pyrotechnics display.

Like, I want a pig cop to snort at me for not having enough brands on my NASCAR power armor. I'd then literally buy Games for Windows Live points to get more in the game.
RYAN: I'VE GOT BALLS OF STEEL.
SEAN: So wait, rewind a second: *Duke Nukem* is gaming's *Spinal Tap*? I'm honestly confused, because at no point in my life did I get the sense that *Duke* was some sort of parody game. Either I'm that dense, which is likely, or at some point before the game was finished, Duke forgot he was a parody and really thought he was badass. Anyway, my wish list is for a character, preferably an unlikable politician, to force Duke to change his name to Duke Nuke Them, citing his lazy contraction as the prime cause of the youth of America's poor standardized test scores. Yes, I ripped that off from *Family Guy*. I actually fully expect the game to be filled with Duke blowing the heads off of characters who look like Jack Thompson—or actually, more likely given the game's development cycle, Senator Joe Lieberman—and calling it a day. The Duke of my dreams will aim a little higher than that.
SHAWN: You're saying someone was serious when he decided Duke would insist that "It's time to kick ass and chew bubble gum, and I'm all out of gum?" I mean, he's no McBain and that was no *Simpsons*, but...s***, you know what? I seriously think you might be right.
RYAN: IT'S TIME TO KICK ASS AND CHEW BUBBLE GUM, AND I'M ALL OUT OF GUM.
SEAN: Well, you do know that bubble-gum line is something wrestler Roddy Piper said in John Carpenter's 1988 *They Live*, right? When people start parodying parodies, I wonder if they understand what a parody actually is. Er, wait, *They Live* is a parody, right? I mean, it's about magic sunglasses that could see aliens....
JEFF: I'm here to tell you kids that it's definitely not ironic. Yes, he speaks in humorous tough-guy cliches. But if you recall your '80s movies, all those humorous tough-guy clichés were taken seriously then, too. I mean, we weren't laughing *at* Bruce Willis and Stallone and Ah-nold. We were laughing with them as they kicked commie or alien or ambiguous Middle Eastern butt.
SHAWN: Next you're gonna tell me that I'm supposed to take *Postal* and *Redneck Rampage* and the rest of them seriously. You guys ever read Frank Miller and Geof Darrow's book *Hard Boiled*?
JEFF: No, those games are legitimate jokes. Except that neither is actually funny.
SEAN: I'm not saying *Redneck Rampage* is a serious sociopolitical study of Arkansas, no. I'm just saying there's a fine line between clever and stupid—and a fine line between "This is joke!" and "...But not really."
SHAWN: Such a fine line that neither of you knew I was joking.
RYAN: YOU'RE AN INSPIRATION FOR BIRTH CONTROL.

Just how relevant *is* Duke Nukem today?

ADVERTISER INDEX

Conflict: Denied

Eidos presents a new highly destructive cooperative FPS

Venezuela is left in a state of civil war after the government is brutally overthrown by a military coup. With factions fighting to reinstate democracy, the U.S. government offers their assistance, though the new government regime has threatened to deploy nuclear weapons if the U.S. meddles in Venezuelan affairs. The threat needs to be neutralized, and the U.S. can't risk nuclear war.

When the U.S. government needs to act but cannot afford to be associated with the operation, deniable operatives are dispatched. Members of the unit must bear no identity—no objects, papers, or clothing that could associate them with the government. Their task is to do anything necessary, no matter how ruthless, to dissolve the threat.

Conflict: Denied Ops is the latest iteration of the *Conflict* series from developer Pivotal Games, and was designed entirely with two-player co-op gameplay in mind. Each character on your two-man team specializes in a different area of weapons combat, one being a sniper and the other a heavy machine gunner, and the goal is to combine tactics that take full advantage of each of the teammates' strengths.

In single-player mode, the game utilizes a streamlined control scheme that makes controlling the positioning of your teammate very fast and unimpeding on gameplay. With only two commands that players need to learn, both executed by pressing or holding a single button, gameplay is never slowed down by menus or complex commands. No matter the skill level of the player at hand, it only takes seconds to learn the system and start integrating your own co-op tactics on the fly. If precision is needed with a specific character, one button allows players to switch between their teammates and take full control.

The result is a system that has players constantly pushing the pace simultaneously with both characters, sending your teammate to hold down positions, lay down cover fire, as well as create distractions and

Ops

flanking opportunities. Of course social gaming is very important for a co-op game, so the entire campaign can be played with a friend online.

Denied Ops also makes full use of Pivotal's new Puncture Technology, which enables the game to have massive, highly destructible environments. This system allows for some unique new tactics such as shooting through walls to create sniping holes or blasting open new paths to take the enemy by surprise. The environments were created to be used to the player's advantage, with lots of exploding objects littered throughout the level to help intensify the firefights.

For a brief overview, here are some of the game's key strengths:

Two-Man Tactics—Switch between team members at any time in single-player mode for maximum control, or have a friend join your game online.

Highly Destructive Environments—Obliterate your enemies with explosions, demolish buildings, blow through walls and destroy almost anything in the environment.

Accessible Action—In single-player mode, give commands to your teammate simply by pressing or holding a single button. Concentrate on the action, not complicated menus or control schemes.

Puncture-Tech™—Utilize strategic destruction made possible with new Puncture-Tech™ technology developed by Pivotal Studios. Blast open new pathways, shoot unaware enemies through walls, or create holes in your cover to generate firing paths.

If you like FPS games that involve lots of fast-paced action and tactical gameplay, *Conflict: Denied Ops* is a great choice for your next combat experience this spring.

Learn more at: www.gamesforwindows.com/en-US/Games/Pages/conflictdeniedops.aspx

Games for Windows

THE OFFICIAL WORD

Homeworld Meets

Sins of a Solar Empire promises to bridge 4X empire building with real-time strategy

Beware of the sins you commit, for they may return to haunt you. So were the words of the sole dissenting opinion on the high tribunal that decreed that the world belonging to a group of humans whose social and scientific practices were considered obscene by the majority of human worlds be confiscated. That was 1,000 years ago.

Sins of a Solar Empire is a real-time strategy game of epic proportions. It is a game in which empires must be explored, expanded, exploited, and exterminated using technological advances, cultural power, diplomacy, economic strength, and military might

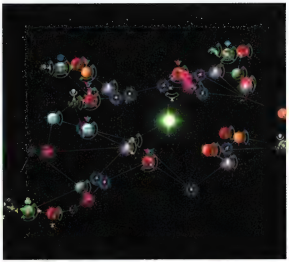
The fires of war have consumed the core Trader worlds. An alien menace known as the Vasari has arrived, desperate for the resources needed to fuel the next stage of its exodus. With no home to return to and an unknown force behind them, the remnants of their once-mighty empire have been running for 10,000 years. The human trade groups have formed an alliance known as the Trader Emergency Coalition to oppose this threat.

Into the middle of this conflagration come the exiled humans from long ago. Now psionically empowered, the Advent intend to take back what was once theirs and punish the descendents of those who banished them.

Players take on the role of leader of an empire belonging to one of these three factions. Each race has its own unique ships, technologies, and strategies to lead them to ultimate victory or utter ruin.

What makes *Sins of a Solar Empire* groundbreaking is its combination of immense scale, far beyond anything that has ever been seen in a turn-based strategy game, with the kind of fluid gameplay that is characteristic of real-time strategy games. Here are a few of its key strengths:

- **Unrivaled scale.** Players can zoom in to control individual ships or zoom out to see multiple star systems with hundreds of planets, all in real time.
- **Massive control without the micromanagement.** *Sins of a Solar Empire* introduces a new user interface concept called the Empire Tree. Previously, RTSes have been limited in scale to what could be realistically displayed in a minimap. The Empire Tree allows players to manage planets, fleets, or individual ships from the same spot. No more "clickfests."



Civilization

- **A new type of multiplayer experience.** Gamers can now save their multiplayer games in progress and return to them later. This provides many new options for multiplayer gamers.

- **No DRM.** No DVD is needed to be kept in the drive to play. Once a user has created a Stardock.net account, they can even redownload the entire game no matter where they bought it.

For strategy players who want more depth in their real-time strategy games and want the key to victory to be their *strategies* and not their reflexes, *Sins of a Solar Empire* is the answer. *Sins* is the result of a team-up between developers who worked on *Homeworld 2: Cataclysm* and *Galactic Civilizations II*.

The fate of three empires is at stake. One empire is paying for the sins of its past, another is fleeing from the sins of the present, and the third is committing sins for its future.

Learn more at:
www.gamesforwindows.com/en-US/Games/Pages/sinsofasolarempire.aspx

GFW'S ULTIMATE GAM

Nobody walks into a car dealership to buy a Formula 1 racer. Same goes for some of the pricey PCs you'll see in the next few pages. But that's not the point of our annual Ultimate Game Machine competition. "Forget the costs," we told PC makers a couple months back—"just deliver the fastest gaming PC humanly possible, whatever the price." And so the call went out once again to find the baddest machine in the land.

For this event, we told vendors to hack everything and overclock anything they pleased. The catch: Whoever crosses the finish line has to offer their computer at the price listed and treat it like any other machine they sell. If a UGM machine's BIOS is heavily modded, yours will be as well—and the company will support it with a warranty. We extended the invitation to 15 top-tier vendors—10 to compete and five others on standby for any inevitable crash-and-burn cases along the way.

With our brutal benchmarks, we expected some failures. *Crysis*, *World in Conflict*, *Unreal Tournament 3*, and *Team Fortress 2* are just the tip of a testing iceberg loaded with CPU-crushing stability tests. In short, we did everything in our power to break these machines. Only eight survived—and some of those barely limped across the finish line.

The astute will notice the absence of several notable PC makers. Where are they? Blame Nvidia. We've been waiting months for their vaunted nForce 780i motherboards that promise full support of three-way SLI (yes, you read that right: three $400-plus graphics cards working in tandem) and more efficient memory usage. We even delayed the competition by one month, hoping to sneak in this bleeding-edge tech just in time—but that didn't happen. The few that stuck it out, though, put everything on the line. Some played it safe; others scrambled to strap on experimental gear, and all the results are on the next few pages.

The truth is that a huge caveat comes with this year's competition due to its horrible timing. Many of the monstrous machines in this competition will ship with newer motherboards weeks after you read this. This doesn't invalidate the UGM results. It just means that in the months to come, these monster machines will perform faster and finish the sprint intact.

Gentlemen, start your engines! ▸ **Loyd Case, Jason Cross, and Darren Gladstone**

SCORE KEY

GFW uses a 10-point scoring scale to inform you, at a glance, whether or not a product is worth your hard-earned money. We strictly enforce a score of 5 as the median, meaning that any hardware receiving a score of 6+ is certainly worthwhile—at least to some extent. Here's how the numbers break down:

9-10: Excellent
Bleeding-edge tech that is virtually bullet-proof. A must-have.

7-8.5: Good
This is a solid performer saddled with some minor flaws.

5-6.5: Average
Eh, it's all right. It'll do the job, but it might not be your best bet.

3-4.5: Bad
Caveat emptor, friend. Serious shortcomings may vary your hardware mileage.

0-2.5: Terrible
Someone needs to get punched for selling this junk.

Editors' Choice award
Any product scoring a 9 or higher receives a *GFW* Editors' Choice award, signifying the very best in PC gaming hardware.

ENERGY CRISIS It's not easy gaming green

A low-powered microwave runs at about 1,200 watts. That's for maybe a minute or two to reheat your day-old pizza. Some of the machines in the UGM competition suck down as much as 3,300 watts in our tests. The next time you have some high-intensity gaming session, keep in mind that you're running that machine for hours at a time, killing kilowatts. Visit www.csgnetwork.com/elecenergycalcs.html to calculate your PC's power consumption.

Powerful PCs weep after we put 'em through the paces, but we don't have enough pages to chronicle the full extent of our torture tests. Head to GFW.1UP.com for even more Ultimate Game Machine competition benchmarks.

1UP NETWORK

XTRAS

ING MACHINE

Finding 2007's most powerful PC

BLEEDING-EDGE CHARMER

Maingear's dark horse surprises in the finish

MANUFACTURER: **Maingear** PRODUCT: **Ephex** PRICE: **$9,860** (tip) WWW.**maingear.com**

We're impressed by Maingear's special Ephex.

THE SYSTEM BOOTS CRAZY FAST, BUT IT ONLY TAKES A FEW BIG APPS AND GAMES TO FILL THE MAIN DRIVE UP.

REVIEW

Every year, one scrappy vendor surprises us. This time, it's Maingear's turn. These guys managed to assemble a (mostly) stable system from an Nvidia nForce 780i motherboard, a Core 2 Extreme QX9650 pushed to 4.2GHz, and three EVGA GeForce 8800 Ultra graphics cards. It's an impressive achievement, given the early state of the hardware.

That's right—they went balls-out with a stacked system rocking Nvidia's new chipset. But they didn't stop there. Toss in a LG Blu-ray/HD-DVD combo burner, a 64GB RAID 0 solid state disk array, and a Killer NIC gaming network card, and you have a veritable cornucopia of bleeding-edge PC gaming tech. All this arrives in an attractive metallic blue case sporting a car-quality paint job.

When it comes to performance, the Ephex doesn't disappoint. The system roared through all of our benchmarks, posting scores that trailed the speedy but unstable Velocity Micro system (see page 93) by a few percentage points with AA and AF turned off—and tied it with the graphics cranked up to 11.

Alas, perfection eludes the Ephex, if only a little. In our intense stability torture test, the Maingear system toiled along for a good half hour—and then the system rebooted. We also experienced one (but just one) crash to the desktop during our *Unreal Tournament 3* benchmarking—the dreaded "display driver has stopped responding" Vista error, which we've seen with systems running a single graphics card, so we can't necessarily pin that on the Ephex.

Now about some of the under-the-hood features that we're not 100 percent sold on yet. We're not convinced that a 64GB solid state drive is a viable solution for a gaming system. Sure, the system boots crazy fast, but it only takes a few big apps and games to fill it up—and then you're just using the terabyte "classic" hard drive to boot your games. Maybe when prices come down and drive sizes increase enough, then we're talking. And then there's the matter of the Killer NIC. We've never been big fans of this add-on—it may look cool inside the box, but this "killer" would sometimes stop working and require a reboot. Luckily, the integrated Nvidia network controller works flawlessly. The fit and finish are excellent, although the cable management is a little too aggressive for our tastes—we like to fiddle with gear on occasion.

Overall, Maingear's Ephex falls just short of being our winner. Its ability to hit 4.2GHz with an Intel Yorkfield CPU and remain stable certainly impresses. However, we suggest losing the Killer NIC, using more conventional storage, and a bit more tweaking to get that last ounce of stability.

VERDICT

- **Superb performance; surprisingly stable, especially given the components.**
- **Solid state drive array and Killer NIC feel more gimmicky than useful.**

8/10

GOOD

Games for Windows THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

SPEED FREAK

A bold but unstable entry from Velocity Micro

MANUFACTURER: **Velocity Micro** PRODUCT: **Raptor Signature Edition** PRICE: **$11,995** URL: **www.velocitymicro.com**

REVIEW

If MacGyver were to assemble a sick system using every trick in his book, it'd probably look something like this UGM entry from Velocity Micro. We're not saying someone assembled this $11,995 machine from Nutrageous wrappers, duct tape, and paper clips—no, the metal casing is smart enough, and the rig runs quietly considering it sports no less than six fans and liquid cooling. We just aren't thrilled with everything we see under the hood.

Getting past some slightly clumsy cabling, you'll find a minor testament to ingenuity inside. With a little creative surgery, Velocity Micro's nForce 680i chipset runs three-way SLI (it's supported, but higher throughputs are the turf of Nvidia's upcoming and largely unavailable nForce 780i motherboard), and the designers overclock just about everything on the board. Cranking Intel's QX9650 CPU to 4GHz, though, is borderline insanity. Maybe that's why it takes a small fusion reactor—OK, a power supply that pushed 1,300W in our tests (though Velocity Micro says the included PSU is rated at 1,000W and pushed 1,150W in their tests)—to fuel this beast. Of course, this amount of mobo monkeying also means your mileage with drivers will vary.

If one goes by performance numbers alone, this Raptor scores amazingly high. It outpaces many in straight sprints with the benchmark games. 3DMark scores rank near the top of the class...and yet this thing still doesn't earn top marks in our books. Why is that? Testing this computer is a lot like racing rocket cars on the Utah salt flats—you reach ludicrous speeds while clenching your teeth, hoping the damn thing doesn't tear itself apart.

The Raptor broke down a record number of times. Five lockups and at least 12 blue screens of death (we lost count at the nasty unrecoverable crashes) are a huge knock against this machine's stability. The red flag shot up when we heard the PSU whine to a halt and saw puffs of smoke drift from the computer. This could've been the end. One quick tech call led to the discovery that a single screw fastened too tightly shorts out the machine. A "minor" point—unless you just dropped major coin on this "ultimate" gaming machine.

VERDICT

- **Hits impressive speeds on most benchmarks.**
- **About as stable as a house on the San Andreas Fault; sucks down lots of energy.**

5\10 AVERAGE

Games for Windows

IF ONLY SIZE MATTERED

iBuyPower's entry is imposing—but safe

MANUFACTURER: **iBuyPower** PRODUCT: **Gamer Paladin—910** PRICE: **$5,499** URL: **www.ibuypower.com**

REVIEW

The first thing we noticed about iBuyPower's Ultimate Game Machine entry is just how much we hate the case. It's a Thermaltake SwordM model—this enormous and heavy monstrosity is anything but user-friendly. A big semicircular metal door on the back meant for cable management only manages to frustrate when you need to change out cables—and good luck plugging in a new graphics card. For all the headaches the case introduces, the roaring-loud CPU is sure to give you a real one. Why doesn't iBuyPower do anything to mitigate all the fan noise? Would it kill them to replace the fans with quieter versions or add resistors to restrict fan speed?

Rocking a triple-SLI GeForce 8800 Ultra setup on an ASUS Striker Extreme motherboard with the Core 2 Extreme QX6850 CPU overclocked to a modest 3.33GHz, the system delivers impressive benchmarks. Our extremely high test resolution lets the triple-SLI shine. However, the modest CPU overclocking gives this machine comparatively lower performance in CPU-centric tasks like video encoding and productivity applications, as evidenced by its PCMark score (see GFW.1UP.com for full benchmarks).

Performance and annoying case aside, there's not really anything of note that would make it stand apart from the pack of enthusiast-class PCs. It doesn't have custom paint work or any special tooling of the case; the wiring inside is neat but not cut, crimped, and tucked away with the precision we expect of "money is no object" systems.

What you wind up with is a system you could put together yourself if you were so inclined. That doesn't make it bad, but we expect UGM candidates to offer something special—something you couldn't easily do on your own that justifies the premium price of a boutique PC vendor. iBuyPower's entry just doesn't do that.

VERDICT

- **Solid as a rock.**
- **Annoying case; lacks the expert craftsmanship expected of high-end boutique PC vendors; loud.**

5\10 AVERAGE

Games for Windows

UGLY BETTY

With the Vigor Force Recon QXN, it's what inside that counts

MANUFACTURER: **Vigor Gaming** PRODUCT: **Force Recon QXN** PRICE: **$5,499** URL: **www.vigorgaming.com**

REVIEW

We've seen some radical cases over the years, but Vigor's is by far the most—how shall we put this—out there. With its two-tone flake paint job (from one angle, it's a gorgeous metal flake purple; from another angle, it's puke green) and massive 320mm fan on the front, it isn't exactly the definition of "tasteful." For the colorblind, let's move on to what's important.

Inside this unsightly chassis beats the heart of a gaming beast. The internals are surprisingly conservative, though the combination performs impressively. An Asus Striker Extreme 680i motherboard and Core 2 Extreme QX6850 pumped up to 3.67GHz form the heart.

Toss in triple XFX GeForce 8800 Ultra Extreme graphics cards, lots of storage (including the familiar WD Raptor RAID 0 array), and specialized triple SLI cooling system, and you have the ingredients for a killer gaming experience.

Vigor eschews tech bling like Killer NICs and SSD drives. Hell, it even lacks a dedicated soundcard, instead opting for the Asus integrated HD audio as its sound source. The upside is the price. At $5,499, it's not cheap—but the Force Recon seems like a bargain compared to some of the other machines in this year's competition.

While the Vigor's benchmark numbers can't keep up with higher-clocked systems, it acquits itself quite well. More important, it was rock solid through all our stability tests—a big plus in our book. If only we didn't have to deal with the resulting ruckus. In the same way that its paint job is about as subtle as parking a tank in your living room, this machine growls out fan noise—certainly enough for other people to notice.

The bottom line is that Vigor's Force Recon QXN offers a stable gaming experience. Just opt for something other than the pukey two-tone we got.

VERDICT

+ Good performance and solid stability.

– It's got a face only a mother could love; lacks some amenities, like a dedicated gaming soundcard.

7\10

GOOD

Games for Windows

REVIEW

If we were giving out awards for Ultimate Paint Job, the Commodore xx PC would win, hands down. The reborn computer company lets you choose from a wide array of custom skins, which Commodore cutely refers to as "C-kins." They're almost all gorgeously done. Ours has an *Eve Online*–themed C-kin that's breathtaking.

Underneath this glamorous exterior lies the heart of an average high-end system. Commodore doesn't ship overclocked CPUs, and the underlying tech is pretty ordinary. The P5N32-E SLI motherboard is a pretty stock 680i board. You can overclock it yourself, of course, and Commodore does include a fairly robust air cooler with the system.

Also in the box: dual SLI GeForce 8800 Ultras, Sound Blaster X-Fi, and lots of storage. The Intel Core 2 Extreme QX6850 runs at its stock 3GHz speed. Of course, running at stock speeds means that the Commodore sailed through our stability tests once we updated the Nvidia graphics driver. Benchmark results are fairly ho-hum, with the dual Nvidia cards giving Commodore's system the oomph needed to place pretty much in the middle of the pack.

Perhaps the coolest feature of the Commodore, outside of the glam exterior, is a disc chock full of old Commodore 64 games and an emulator to run them.

Another award Commodore would win (if we were giving one out—price is no object in the UGM competition) is the value award. Commodore prices the system at $4,999. Being the value leader is certainly a Commodore tradition. Overall, if you don't need bleeding-edge tech and just want a solid gaming system with a pretty face, then this one's a keeper. It's just not a UGM competition winner.

A FAMILIAR FACE

Commodore runs a gorgeous, steady ship

MANUFACTURER: **Commodore** PRODUCT: **Commodore xx** PRICE: **$4,999** URL: **www.commodoregaming.com**

VERDICT

+ Gorgeous exterior; very stable; one of the less expensive systems we tested.

– Middling performance; not really bleeding-edge.

7\10

GOOD

Games for Windows

REVIEW

When we first reviewed HP's Blackbird 002 in *GFW* #11, it represented the maiden voyage for the joint venture between Voodoo PC and HP. This titan doesn't come with fancy custom paint jobs, but there's no denying the Voodoo heritage lurking inside—that "Voodoo DNA" badge on the interior isn't just for show. This is a beautifully sleek and elegant enthusiast-class PC.

Unlike every other ultimate machine here, the Blackbird is totally devoid of the gaudy windows and lights that make your PC look more like a tacky import tuner. The insides are impeccably neat and almost entirely tool-less; you can swap out most parts without touching a screwdriver. Voodoo's attention to detail is evident in everything from the custom Razer DeathAdder mouse to the clever packaging that makes it easy to unbox and set up.

With the Core 2 Extreme QX9775 overclocked from 3.2GHz to 4GHz, the system is entirely stable. Together with three fast 160GB Western Digital drives in RAID as the boot volume, it delivers fantastic benchmark scores on general applications and games at "realistic" resolutions. Unfortunately, the videocards hold back the 2560x1600 performance tests: two Radeon HD 3870s in CrossFire mode are fast but no match for systems running three GeForce 8800 Ultras in triple-SLI. No doubt updated machines far more powerful than this will emerge from HP by the time you read this, but we have to go off what we got. We love this system, but at the end of the day, this is the Ultimate *Gaming* Machine competition—and the visuals offered here just don't cut it. ●

VOODOO INSIDE

Videocards keep HP's Blackbird 002 grounded

MANUFACTURER: **HP** PRODUCT: **Blackbird 002** PRICE: **$6,300** URL: **http://h20435.www2.hp.com**

VERDICT

- **Tool-less case is very easy to work on and well designed; very fast CPU.**
- **Dual Radeon HD 3870 cards can't keep up with the other "Ultimate" machines.**

7/10

Games for Windows

BROHEBACH BARGAIN

CyberPower's system looks good on paper, at least

MANUFACTURER: **CyberPower** PRODUCT: **Gamer Infinity WX** PRICE: **$3,999** URL: **www.cyberpowerpc.com**

REVIEW

Bargain PC builder CyberPower ran into a couple of hitches during this year's UGM competition. The company's machine as submitted looks good on paper, with a Core 2 Extreme QX9650 overclocked to 3.9GHz (with a whopping 1,733MHz frontside bus). If only we could get the machine to successfully boot at this speed. We worked on the phone with CyberPower for over a half-hour tweaking the BIOS to try to get this overclocked rig working and just couldn't make it stable; eventually we had to ratchet down to the 3GHz default clock speed. CyberPower says this is due to an early revision of the Nvidia nForce 780i chipset motherboard in our system and that, of course, everything is running great back at their labs.

Even so, we wouldn't recommend this system. The other top dogs ship with three high-end Nvidia cards in triple-SLI; this one uses standard dual-card SLI. Combined with the stock clock speed, the system certainly isn't going to win the performance race (or even come close). The Cooler Master Cosmos case isn't our favorite design, and the strong acrylic smell and sloppy edges of the custom red paint job make it seem like the whole thing is slathered in nail polish.

Though the system isn't especially loud, it isn't as quiet as some of the others in the competition this year—CyberPower could have done more to reduce fan noise. Perhaps worst of all, we couldn't get the system online. It simply wouldn't get a proper IP address on our office network at any network jack, and none of the other machines had this problem. Perhaps that's another issue with the not-quite-fully-baked 780i chipset motherboard.

CyberPower is capable of making good machines for a good price. Last year's entry, the Gamer Infinity SLI KO, was our "best value" winner. However, in this "best of the best" competition, CyberPower just dropped the ball. The craftsmanship, attention to detail, and commitment to quality and reliability that show in the little details on the best UGM candidates are nowhere to be seen. ●

VERDICT

- **Not a bad price for a high-end PC.**
- **Sloppy, from the overclocking meltdowns to the paint finish.**

4/10

BAD

Games for Windows

EXPERIENCE PAYS OFF

Falcon Northwest sets the bar

MANUFACTURER: **Falcon Northwest** PRODUCT: **Mach V** PRICE: **$12,000** URL: **www.falcon-nw.com**

REVIEW

Falcon Northwest practically invented boutique high-end PCs specifically aimed at gaming enthusiasts about 15 years ago—they've been at it longer than almost any similar company. This experience shows in nearly every facet of this excellent Mach V machine.

Surprisingly, the Mach V wasn't essentially tied for first place in our benchmarks, as has usually been the case with past UGM submissions from Falcon. A delay in Nvidia's nForce 780i chipset forced them to ship an entry with a Core 2 Extreme QX6850 and nForce 680i board instead of using Intel's very latest "Yorkfield" CPU—but they still managed to push the machine to 3.8GHz while remaining totally stable. And with three GeForce 8800 Ultra cards in triple-SLI mode, the gaming benchmarks are great. The OS resides on a pair of 32GB solid state drives in a RAID array, with a pair of 1TB Hitachi Deskstar drives in a RAID array for storage and game installs. Even if it's not the benchmark *winner*, it's safe to say that this blazing-fast computer delivers the kind of elite performance we expect from UGM competitors. (Since our deadline for machine submissions, Falcon NW has made Penryn- and 780i-based systems available.)

While we consider game performance to be of the utmost importance, it's not the beginning and end of the UGM competition. When you spend this kind of money on a no-holds-barred gaming PC, you expect more than just high-end components and overclocking. Falcon's custom paint jobs are of exquisite quality, glossy and smooth to the touch, like a brand-new exotic car. The mouse and keyboard get the same treatment to match. The inside of the machine shows expert craftsmanship and attention to detail—each cable is hidden from sight, crimped and clipped and folded to be exactly as long as it needs to be, and no more. It's clean, smooth, neat, and attractive. Maybe it's the automotive-quality paint job, but there's a "new computer smell" when taking this system out of its box that's like driving a new car off the lot. An embossed leather binder holds all your install and recovery discs, support documentation, machine specs, and testing checklist. Falcon throws in some nice little extras like a rigid mouse pad, T-shirt, hat, and even a coffee mug and a pound of grounds so you can "break in" your new gaming PC with a caffeine-fueled 16-hour fragfest. Should you ever need to call Falcon's tech support, you'll actually call the office that built your machine, not a third-party tech support agency or an outsourced rep from India.

If we had a message for Falcon, it would be this: It's time to "update the excellence," perhaps with a Mach VI line. The custom case is nice, but we've seen it for a couple of years now. The extras are good, but it's time to change them up. We're not saying that you should stop making these kick-ass computers—just make newer, fresher, even *more* kick-ass machines.

VERDICT

Excellent craftsmanship; beautiful paint job; fantastic performance; quiet.

Doesn't contain latest CPU and motherboard, so didn't lead in benchmarks.

9/10 EXCELLENT

Games for Windows

WINNER: 2007 CHAMP!

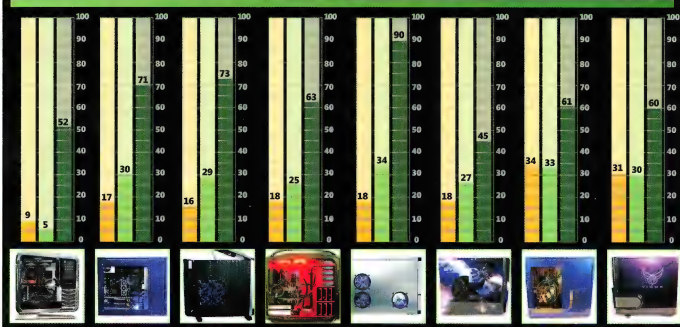
Falcon Northwest's attention to detail shows in every facet.

BY THE NUMBERS

	Vigor Gaming Force Recon QXN	Velocity Micro Raptor Signature Edition	CyberPower Gamer Infinity WX	MainGear Ephex	HP Blackbird 002	Falcon Northwest Mach V	Commodore vx	iBuyPower Gamer Paladin—910
CPU	Intel Core 2 Extreme QX6850	Intel Core 2 Extreme QX9650	Intel Core 2 Extreme QX9650	Intel Core 2 Extreme QX9650	Intel Core 2 Extreme QX9775	Intel Core 2 Extreme QX6850	Intel Core 2 Extreme QX6850	Intel Core 2 Extreme QX6850
CPU Clock Speed	3.67GHz	4GHz	3GHz	4.2GHz	4GHz	3.8GHz	3GHz	3.33GHz
CPU Multiplier	11x	10x	9x	11x	9x	9x	Unknown	10x
CPU Cooler	Vigor Gaming Whisper Cool Cooler	"Active" liquid cooling. Maintenance-free	Asetek 120mm watercooler. No refill necessary	x20 liquid cooled. No refill necessary	Liquid cooled. No refill necessary	Sanyo Denki liquid cooled (sealed)	850 watt ICE Cube	Liquid cooled. No refill necessary
Memory Make	Kingston HyperX 2GB	Crucial Ballistix Tracer PC-800	Mushkin	Corsair Dominator PC2 8500	Corsair Dominator XMS	Corsair CM2X1024-6400C4D	Corsair Dominator Twin2x2048-8500C5D	Corsair Dominator DDR-2
Memory Quantity	2GB	2GB	4GB	2GB	4GB	4GB	2GB	2GB
Memory Clock	800MHz	1,000MHz	1,066MHz	1,066MHz	1,066MHz	800MHz	1,066MHz	1,066MHz
Hard Drive Models	2x 150GB Western Digital Raptor, 10,000 rpm; 2x 750GB Western Digital, 7,200 rpm	2x 64GB Mtron Solid State; 1x 1TB Hitachi, 7,200 rpm	2x 150GB Western Digital Raptor, 10,000 rpm; 2x 750GB SATA II, 7,200 rpm	2x 32GB Mtron Solid State; 1TB Hitachi, 7,200 rpm	3x 150GB Western Digital Raptor, 10,000 rpm; 1x 1TB, 7,200 rpm	2x Mtron 32GB SSD MSD-S35032; 2x Hitachi 1TB, 7,200 rpm	2x 150GB SATA 10,000rpm; 500GB SATA, 7,200 rpm	2x 150GB Western Digital Raptor, 10,000 rpm; 1x 750GB WD SATA-II, 7,200 rpm
RAID Type	RAID 0	RAID 0	RAID 0	RAID 0	RAID 0	RAID 0	RAID 0	RAID 0
Optical Drive 1	Asus 20x Dual-Layer DVD-R/W with LightScribe	Lite-On Blu-ray Burner/Reader	Lite-On LH-2B1S-187 Blu-ray	LG Blu-ray/HD-DVD-ROM and 16X DVD±R/W Burner	LaCie 16x Dual-Layer DVD-R/W with LightScribe	LG Blu-ray/HD-DVD/DVD-R/W SATA	DVD-R/W	LG Blu-ray writer/ HD-DVD
Optical Drive 2	N/A	Lite-On 18x Dual-Layer DVD-R/W drive with LightScribe	Lite-On LH-20A1H 20X DVD-R/W	Lite-On 20x Dual-Layer DVD-R/W with LightScribe	LaCie 16x Dual-layer DVD-R/W with LightScribe	Lite-On 20x DVD±R/W	N/A	Sony 20x DL DVD±R/W
Graphics Card(s)	3x Nvidia GeForce 8800 Ultra (3-Way SLI)	3x Nvidia GeForce 8800 Ultra (3-Way SLI)	2x Nvidia GeForce 8800 Ultra (SLI)	3x EVGA Nvidia GeForce 8800 Ultra (3-Way SLI)	2x ATI Radeon HD 3870 (CrossFire)	3x Nvidia GeForce 8800 Ultra (3-Way SLI)	2x PoV Nvidia GeForce 8800 Ultra (SLI)	3x EVGA GeForce 8800 Ultra (3-Way SLI)
Soundcard	Onboard 7.1	Onboard 7.1	Onboard 7.1	Sound Blaster X-Fi XtremeGamer	Onboard	Onboard	Sound Blaster X-Fi XtremeGamer Fatal1ty Pro	Onboard 7.1
Other Cards	N/A	N/A	N/A	Killer NIC	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Operating System	Windows Vista Ultimate (32-bit)	Windows Vista Ultimate (32-bit)	Windows Vista Ultimate (64-bit)	Windows Vista Ultimate (32-bit)	Windows Vista Ultimate (32-bit)	Windows Vista Ultimate (32-bit)	Windows Vista Ultimate (32-bit)	Windows Vista Ultimate (32-bit)
Price as Tested	$5,499	$11,995	$3,999	$9,860	$6,300	$12,000	$4,999	$5,499

UGM BENCHMARKS

Crysis, **DirectX 10, 1920x1200 (frames per second)**
***World in Conflict*, DirectX 10, 2560x1600 4xAA 16xAF (frames per second)**
***Unreal Tournament 3* botmatch, DirectX 9, 2560x1600 (frames per second)**



HP
3DMARK06 SCORE*:
20,070

FALCON NORTHWEST
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17,641

IBUYPOWER
3DMARK06 SCORE:
16,795

CYBERPOWER
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15,472

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20,995

COMMODORE
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15,309

MAINGEAR
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21,358

VIGOR
3DMARK06 SCORE:
18,613

NOTE: 3DMARK06 SCORES MEASURED USING DEFAULT 3DMARK06 SETTINGS

GREENSPEAK

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THE PEGGLE DISEASE

When casual gaming stops being casual

COLUMN

Jeff Green

Jeff Green was raised in the wild by a flock of geese. He still enjoys the occasional breadcrumb, which you can send to jeff_green@ziffdavis.com.

It is no secret that I am the ultimate überking of procrastination. I have not only made a career of it, but, essentially, a life of it. For example, it took me over five years to get my four-year college degree, thanks to a rather crucial side agenda of pinball and *Missile Command*. It took me seven years to ask my now-wife to marry me, thanks to a firm reluctance (to paraphrase Groucho Marx) to join any club that would have me as a member. But most critically, especially as it pertains to this magazine, my procrastination manifests itself in a monthly ordeal of trying to get this column written.

Usually I have a pretty good excuse. I do have to run the rest of this magazine, for one thing, which means dodging e-mails and phone calls while surfing the Web and making sure that managing editor Sean Molloy has everything under control. That's hard work. I'm also a husband and father, which means dodging my family while watching television and reading and surfing the Web. That's hard work, too.

But this month I had no excuses. I had a long holiday break and was well-rested. This issue was in good shape. My family was healthy and happy. By all accounts, this column could have been turned in early, rather than on the very last day before it ships to the printer, just barely avoiding having to print a blank page here, or maybe just a page with "I suck" written in 92-point type.

But one thing caused my downfall this month. An unexpected thing. A seemingly harmless thing that should have had no effect on me whatsoever, because I thought I was immune. The name of that thing? *Peggle Deluxe*. Yeah, I know. I actually thought I was "done" with *Peggle* months ago, but because we named it one of the Top 10 Games of 2007 in this issue, I decided I should play it again—you know, just for a few minutes—to refresh my memory before writing it up for that article. Bad, bad move.

Because here's the thing with *Peggle Deluxe*—and, indeed, with all of the best so-called "casual games": They may seem harmless, but in truth, they are the most insidious timesinks in all of gaming. I'm not kidding. Forget *World of WarCraft* or other more "serious" games. It's the *Peggles* and *Chuzzles* and *Text Twists* of the world that are the real enemies of productivity. It's an old joke that *Tetris* was released by the Soviets in the 1980s to destroy American productivity, but sometimes (like at 3 a.m., when I am clicking Retry Challenge on *Peggle* for the 100th time in a row), I wonder if it's not true. Maybe the Commies really are behind all this, turning this great nation of ours into a horde of slack-jawed zombies mindlessly waiting for L-shaped pieces to fall from the sky, while they sneak into the country late at night, as Commies are wont to do, to take our women and children.

What makes casual games so evil? Ironically, insidiously, it is their casual nature itself. It is a lie, a deception, this "casual" thing, a true wolf-in-sheep's-clothing phenomenon. It implies, both to you (if you want to kid yourself) and to anyone who catches you, a lack of commitment. You are not hunkered down in full-on multi-hour gaming. You are simply wasting a couple minutes here, taking a well-deserved break. In fact, you might as well go ahead and get fully righteous and rationalizing about it! Must you work every minute of the day? You've earned this! It'll refresh you! And you're just playing a quick game or two, and then it's back to the grind! So what's the problem?

ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN TAYLOR

So there you are. You have convinced yourself. Bravo. Now you can readjust yourself in your seat, crack your knuckles, and, in just one quick game or two, top your previous high score. And, hey, even if you don't, no biggie. You don't really care. You're just here for a minute anyway. And you don't even really like this game. It's just a dumb little time-waster. And this is how it begins. This is how the Commies win. We have all been there, every one of us. One game turns into two games, two turn into 10, and before you know it, three hours have passed. Every single round is your "last one," except, well, *this* one doesn't count because you got off to a lame start, or the computer cheated, or you just made that one stupid mistake and otherwise would have won, which you know you'll do this next time, right now, and it will only take a minute, promise.

This is the sick disease I succumbed to this month, thanks to *Peggle*. This is why this column is so ridiculously late. Because a so-called "casual game," booted up for "just a couple minutes," came to utterly own me. (I have since uninstalled, and then reinstalled, the game.) Let this be a lesson to you, kids. Stay away from casual games. They are dangerous. They might be Communist time bombs. If you want to lead a productive life, if you want to help America, stick with real, hardcore games like *World of WarCraft* or *Team Fortress 2* that don't let you kid yourself, that make you fully *commit* to the proposition of goofing off, like games are supposed to. As for me, I'm done with *Peggle*, for good this time. Right after this one last round. ●

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Games for Windows

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